

## MASTERPIECE

# Glorious Golden Pagoda

Burma's Devout Have Gilded the Shwedagon for a Millennium

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Asia inspired awe horizontally. In the perpendicular West, the great public monuments abased the visitor, compelling an upward gaze. The very name of the Acropolis announced its height; the interior spaces of Gothic cathedrals soared to heaven, leaving worshippers far below in the terrestrial mire. Yet the Taj Mahal and Angkor Wat proclaimed their majesty as the focus of a wide vista, to be approached with contemplative languor. A complete transit of the Forbidden City, crossing one vast courtyard after another, takes hours; Confucian architects must have believed that fatigue promotes obedience.

The magnificent exception is the Shwedagon, Burma's glorious, golden pagoda. Rising 320 feet from its base atop steep Singuttara Hill, on the outskirts of old Rangoon, the Shwedagon looms over the approaching pilgrim at a height equivalent to that of the Pyramid of Cheops, the tallest structure in the world until the Eiffel Tower was completed. Shwedagon means "golden hills," and the place lives up to its name with fabulous excess: Since the Buddhist shrine was raised a thousand years ago, the devout of Burma have repeatedly replated the surface of its central, bell-shaped stupa with gold, which is now estimated to weigh more than 100,000 pounds. The ornamental crown, the *hti*, is set with thousands of diamonds, rubies, emeralds, topazes and sapphires; at the apex, a 76-carat diamond may be seen twinkling for miles at dawn and sunset.



The magnificent Buddhist shrine rises 320 feet from its base atop Singuttara Hill on the outskirts of old Rangoon.

Like the Athenian Acropolis, the Shwedagon grew haphazardly, by accretion. The harmony of its arrangement is not the creation of a master designer like Imhotep or Christopher Wren, but rather a millennium-long collaboration of the entire Burmese people, the repository of the national soul. The massive central stupa is surrounded by dozens of smaller stupas, pavilions housing huge bells, temples devoted to the previous Buddhas, and freestanding devotional sculptures, all gilded or whitewashed. There are eight planetary posts, for the eight days of the week (Wednesday is divided into two), where people come to pray on their birthdays. Gaily colored Buddhist pennants flap in the breeze, and always there is the tinkling of thousands of silver and gold bells. At dusk, the summit of Singuttara Hill is bathed in a feathery golden radiance, as the dying sunlight glows on the polished slopes of the stupa.

The anchoring element of the pagoda's design is the sky. Early Buddhist stupas were perfect, vaguely mammary hemispheres, rooted in the earth. But the Shwedagon is a crisp spire, an irresistible vortex that gathers up the energy of everything around it and funnels it into the vault of sky. Here, one doesn't simply gaze up to heaven; one ascends.

From the beginning, foreign visitors were dazzled. In 1586, Ralph Fitch, the first Englishman to record his impressions of Burma, took note of the pagoda's salient qualities: The Shwedagon, he wrote, "is of a wonderful bignesse, and all gilded from the foot to the toppe . . . it is the fairest place, as I suppose, that is in all the world." Kipling painted a more vivid picture: "Then a golden mystery upheaved itself on the horizon -- a beautiful winking wonder that blazed in the sun."

Archaeologists say that the pagoda was built in the 10th century by the Mon people, but the Burmese will tell you that the Shwedagon was erected 2,500 years ago to house eight hairs from the head of Gautama Buddha. When he attained enlightenment, the Buddha appeared in a dream to a Burmese king named Okkalapa, who sent his sons to India to find him. For the gift of a honey cake, the Enlightened One plucked the hairs from his head and gave them to the princes. They returned with the relics in an emerald casket and presented them to their father. When Okkalapa opened the box, all the trees in the Himalayas flowered and a shower of jewels fell from heaven. The pious king set himself at once to the task of building a stupa to commemorate the new spiritual age.

All religions are syncretic, drawing on the traditions that preceded them, but Buddhism is most inclusive of all. A Buddhist shrine is an open house, with no one in charge. One of the most popular shrines at the Shwedagon is devoted to the *nats*, Burma's ancient deities midway between demigods and fairies, sometimes merciful and sometimes malevolent, who were worshipped for centuries before the advent of Buddhism.

In addition to being the focus of Burma's spiritual life, the Shwedagon has also exerted a potent pull over the country's earthly affairs. One of the sparks that lit the independence movement in the early 20th century was the refusal of British imperialists to remove their shoes before entering the heathen shrine. The Burmese endured poverty, plague and foreign rule, but disrespecting the Shwedagon was a step too far. Last September, the monks' revolt against the country's military government began at the Shwedagon, where peaceful, prayerful protests were suppressed with tear gas and batons. Security was restored, but not order: The army's insult to the national soul awaits its karmic redress.

Another celebrity pilgrim, Somerset Maugham, wasn't dazzled but instead opened his heart: "The Shwedagon rose superb, glistening with its gold, like a sudden hope in the dark night of the soul of which the mystics write." Maugham, a good Catholic, was thinking of Christian mysticism, but he felt the infinite attractive power of the vortex and its universal promise of hope.

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