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# Buddha's Beacons

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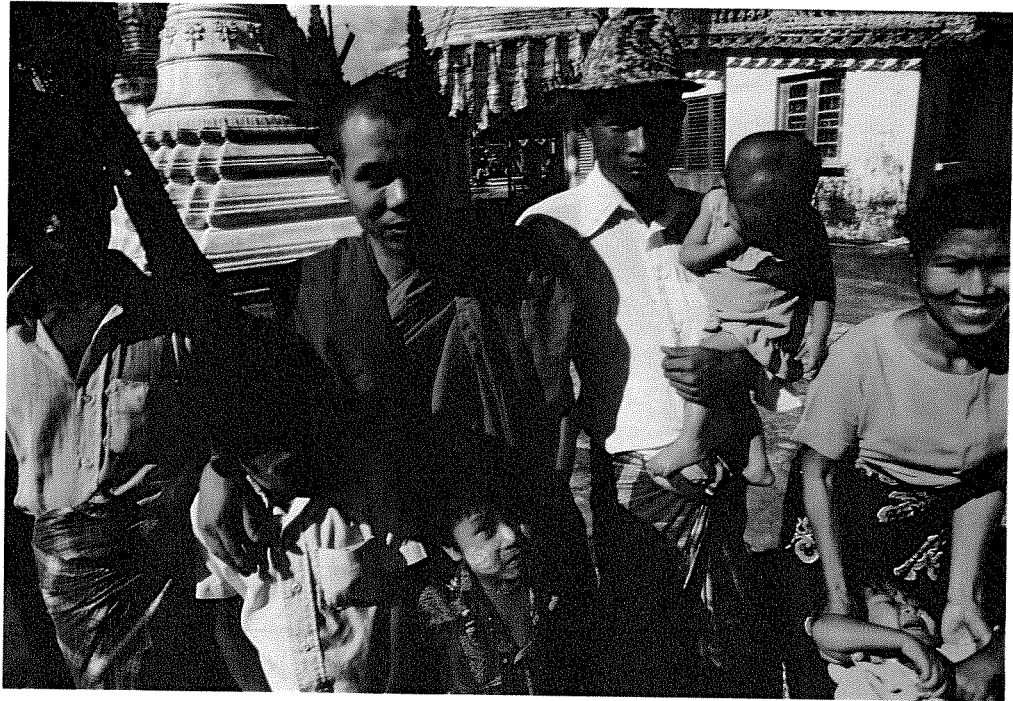
A massive golden cone hovers above Rangoon. From the window of the banking jet it is the city's most prominent feature, the epicenter of Shwe Dagon, the sacred hilltop compound. Elaborate wooden entrance structures descend like tunnels in four directions, taking in and releasing steady streams of visitors.

The hill hosts one of Burma's most important sanctuaries, and its central cone continuously begets new shrines on its paved crest. Nearly 100 can be counted. Some are being constructed, others have been there for centuries. The site is 2,500 years old, and today it retains its active role as a civic attraction and a center of public discourse. The pagoda looms large in the city's mind, a Buddhist sanctum in a socialist temple. It is a community center, one of Rangoon's few formal spaces, a protected public-private plane, an elevated orbit for countless circumambulations. The compound generates exchange of friends and relatives, and of oneself with the transcendent realms reached in solitary meditation.

The evening sun is saturated with red-gold, its rays horizontal in submission to Shwe Dagon's gravity. Into this luminous haze, in measured pace, surface the sunset pilgrims from the tunnels' ascendant darkness. They halt for a moment,

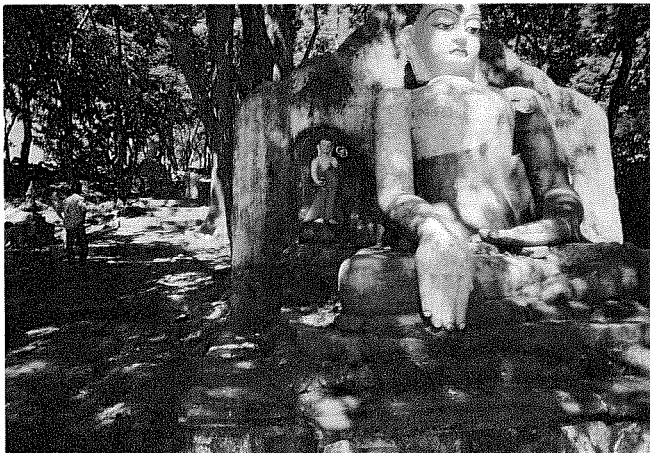
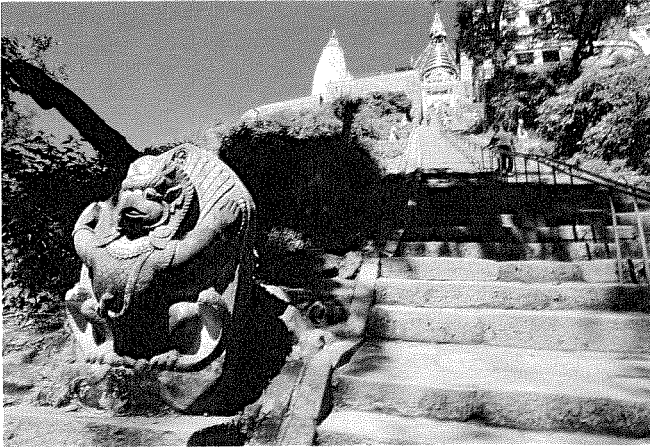
Photos by Peter Droege

squint into the sun, gaze across the square, then commence their clockwise circulation. Some seem from the city, others from the fields, all in their finest cloth. The plaza comes alive with whispers and quiet laughs. Garlands and incense are offered, purchased in the tunnels below. The sinking sun amplifies the sense of presence, of oneself and the city, the country, the sky. The plateau spins suspended, an entrance into ethereal existence, floating amid the city sounds below. The spired cone is an antenna of faith and a beacon of reassurance, charged by collective pleas, a relay station between earth and the heavens, made conductive with tons of gold.



Later on, the pilgrims stroll south, across the railway tracks, to Rangoon's other communication center, the district of movie houses. Tonight's attractions include a short presentation on West Germany's recent industrial and cultural achievements, an Indian melodrama, 007, and Hong Kong kung fu.





At five o'clock in the morning the festival is fully under way. Red dust between their eyes, the pilgrims wander westward. Roads and paths meander toward the bridge and lead across the river to the fringe of the city. In the distance Swayambhunath, Buddhist enclave in Hindu kingdom, is perched atop a hill. Ramps and stairs climb through dozing neighborhoods. The trail is lined with mounds of flower petals and peddlers of multicolored powder. The procession prods itself along with drums, gongs, and wooden flutes. It passes by hybrid icons, small temples, and sacred statues, Buddhas, Ganeshes, and Garudas. The rising system of paths is the root structure of the sanctuary, and the roadside icons signal the temple's presence. As it draws closer the balance between the profane and the sacred gradually tips in favor of the latter. The roofs of Kathmandu fall back, and dawn breaks.

The valley is thought to have been a lake in prehistoric times, and this hill would then have been its island. A gate on its foot marks the wooded site. Steps surge skyward to the upper entrance of the temple proper. Here modest temples, brick dwellings, and a library of Tibetan scriptures are gathered around the small square. Clamoring pilgrims pace in a circle, through and by the ancillary structures, around

the stupa. The white egg is the very focus of the temple and of the elaborate network of paths and places which link it inseparably to the city.

The stupa restages an ancient Indian feature, a mutated tumulus, bearing relics of the Buddha or a universal emperor. Yet, it is not an exclusively Buddhist icon. The Sanskrit word *stupa* literally is "that which has been amassed in praise of something," and its synonym *caitya* translates into "support for contemplation." It consists of the dome on its base, carrying a small palace-like structure and one umbrella or a stack of them, royal emblem of excellence. The structure is organized around a real or imaginary *yupa*, symbol of a sacrificial post, the Buddha's divine ladder between the transcendent and the immanent worlds. The stupa and especially its central dome carry a plenitude of meanings, over time and in the different regions where it is found. It signifies the "human aspect in cosmic dimensions," roof of the world, cosmic mountain, center of the world, the cosmic lotus in the pond, the skull of the monkey king, the head and body of the Buddha, his residence, and his death, the Buddha's final nirvana.<sup>1</sup>

India's golden-age stupas carry stories from the Buddha's life and the *yatakas*, the body of



Buddhist myths, messages about correct attitude. The Nepalese stupa is less laden with literal information. Still, Swayambhunath and others are powerful manifestations and sources of social reality. The result of common patronage, stupas and pagodas at once manifest and affirm communities; designed to retain universal knowledge, they permit their visitors to attain it in return.

**Note**

- 1 Pramod Chandra, George P. Bickford Professor of Indian and South Asian Art, Harvard University.

