

A Study of the Significant parts of Myanmar Pagodas

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the significant parts of Myanmar Pagodas. It explained how significant these parts are in terms of Myanmar Buddhist culture and how each part relates to Buddha's teachings. It studies art and architecture of these pagodas and discusses from the religious point of view. The research aims to analyze the meanings and significance of the components of the pagodas which are invaluable cultural heritages of Myanmar. Data are collected from *Pāli* scripture, commentaries (*Aṭṭhakathā*), sub-commentaries (*Ṭīkā*) and other miscellaneous religious literature. Descriptive method is used in writing this paper.

Keywords: significant part of pagodas, Buddhist culture, Myanmar heritage

Introduction

This paper is to analyze the significant parts of Myanmar Pagodas. It briefly presented the origin of pagodas and differences in their structures. The origin of pagodas is actually a funeral mound of holy persons. Therefore, in the center of every pagoda, there is a small chamber to enshrine the relics. Over the years, the design of the construction of pagodas changed in various forms. Unchanged part of pagoda is, however, the relic chamber. For Buddhists, pagodas became a symbol of the Buddha. According to Buddhist literature, a relic enshrined pagoda represents the fragments of the *Parinibbāna* (passing away) Buddha. Therefore, Buddhists do merit in these pagodas. The custom of paying homage to the pagodas has been practised in Myanmar since the ancient time. Over the centuries, architectural designs of pagodas gradually changed. It may be due to the innovation and development of architectural decoration of the pagodas. This paper tried to answer the main questions such as how significant these parts of the pagodas are and how each part of pagodas relates with and represents to the Buddha's teachings. The aim of this research is to highlight the most significant parts of Myanmar Pagodas.

Aim and Objective

The aim of this research is to understand the importance, significance and meaningfulness of the particular parts of Myanmar Pagodas which are the cultural heritages of our country. The objective of this research paper is to share the knowledge about the origin and history of pagodas and changing designs of pagodas.

Materials and Method

Descriptive method was used in writing this research paper. This is an archival research and data are collected from the *Pāli* scripture, commentaries (*Aṭṭhakathā*), sub-commentaries (*Ṭīkā*) and other miscellaneous religious literature.

Research Questions

1. How significant and meaningful are these particular parts of Myanmar pagodas?
2. Why are significant parts included in Myanmar pagodas?
3. How does each part of pagodas relate to the Buddha's teachings?

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Literature Review

Meaning of Pagoda

Myanmar people call pagoda as 'ceti'. The term 'ceti' derives from Pāli words 'cetiya'. In Sanskrit, it is called 'caitya'. 'Caitya' means 'a place that should be worshipped' or 'a place that should be paid homage'. Therefore, pagoda can be defined as 'a place that should be worshipped' or 'a place that should be paid homage'. There are many things called pagoda. They may be 'a tree, a grove, a mountain, a shrine for deity, a funeral mound, a pagoda made of sand, a statue, etc.' One thing in common in all of them is that it is 'a place to be paid homage'.¹

According to the book "The Wonder that was India", written by A. L. Basham, the word 'pagoda' comes from Pāli word 'dhātugabbha' meaning 'a place to enshrine relic of the Buddha'. In addition, pagoda is called in Sanskrit as 'stūpa' and 'cetiya'. The translations of these words are as follows;

1. dhātugabbha > dhāgabbha > dhāgaba > bagada > pagoda
2. stūpa(skt) > thūpa(pāli) > thūpā > putho/patho(myan)
3. catiya(skt) > cetiya(pāli) > ceti(myan)²

The custom of paying homage to the pagodas has been practised since the beginning the Buddhist religion. In ancient time, people had fear of severe weather and the danger of wild animals. So, they created the things to be taken as refuge in order to protect from dangers.³ Moreover, they created the places to worship. In this way, the tree, the grove, the mountain, the garden and the shrine were also called as pagodas.⁴

During the Vedic period, when a holy person or a member of regional government died, his dead body was burned and the ash was buried under a mound. Then the funeral mound was encompassed with stones as a compound. They were called pre-Buddhist pagodas, but not Buddhist pagodas which were worshipped by the Buddhists.⁵

According to MahāparinibbānaSutta in DīghaNikāya, there was a story about why the Buddha permitted the people to build the pagodas. While the Buddha was staying in the Jetavana monastery, Sāvatti, many people used to come there to pay homage and donate alms, flowers and so on. However, sometimes, the Buddha was absent so Anāthapiṇḍika, the donor of Jetavana monastery, requested Venerable Ānanda to ask the Buddha for something which represented the Buddha himself. In this way, the Buddha gave permission to construct the pagodas for the people to pay homage on behalf of the Buddha himself.⁶

Different Kinds of Pagodas

There are three kinds of pagoda, which were permitted by the Buddha. These are *Sārīkacetī* (*Dātucetī*), *Paribhogacetī* and *Uddissacetī*.⁷ *Sārīkacetī* is a

¹ပါ-မြန်မာန်၊ ၁၉၅၄၊ ၃၉၇။ ဧတိပုထိုးသမိုင်း၊ ၁၉၇၅၊ စာ၊ ၁

²A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, 1951, p. 402

³Dh.A,II, 1968, p. 156

⁴ဧတိပုထိုးသမိုင်း၊ ၁၉၇၅၊ စာ၊ ၁

⁵ဧတိပုထိုးသမိုင်း၊ ၁၉၇၅၊ စာ၊ ၈

⁶DA,II, 1968, p. 106

⁷Dh.A, II, 1968, p. 163

kind of pagoda in which the relics of the Buddha are enshrined. That kind of pagoda should be built only when the Buddha died. Since it is a place to enshrine the Buddha's relics, it is also called *Dātu cetī*. *Paribhogacetī* is a pagoda in which the utensils of the Buddha are enshrined. According to Sayadaw Ashin Janakā bhivamsa, the temple in which the image of the Buddha is enshrined must be called a *Paribhogacetī*.¹ *Uddissacetī* is images and symbols which are made to represent the Buddha.

On the other hand, the book written by Mahārthera Sāriputta in *Sāratthadīpa-nīṭikā* identified four kinds of pagodas. These are *Dātu cetī*, *Dhammacetī*, *Uddissacetī* and *Paribhogacetī*.² Myanmar Buddhist people generally used to identify four kinds of pagodas. *Dhammacetī* means a pagoda that is a place to enshrine the textbooks of *Pāli*, commentaries and sub-commentaries. Although there are four kinds of pagodas, the majority of Myanmar people know only *Dātu cetī*. In this paper, the researcher would mainly discuss the *Dātu cetī*. It is all kinds of Buddha's images and symbols which are built in the memory of the Buddha.

In Myanmar, we can see different designs in the construction of pagodas and parts of the pagodas represent different meanings. Concerning about the origin of the pagodas, the historian Dr Zaw Htun described in his book *စေတီပုထိုးသမိုင်း*,³ the meaning of *cetī*, the origin of pagoda, and concept of the *cetī* in Buddhist religion. He also explained that, the *cetī* were built in India before the reign of King Aśoka. Over the years, with the imagination and creativity of the donors, the designs and styles of pagodas and its parts gradually changed.

The book written by မင်းစည်သူ in *စေတီဆင်းတုကိုးကွယ်မှုသမိုင်း* (2001), presented background history of pagodas, origin of pagodas and compared the *cetī* and *putho*. He discussed the Buddha era pagodas, India pagodas, Myanmar pagodas, Tharekhattara pagodas, and Bagan pagodas and also explained the meaning of different parts of pagodas. Another one is *The Wonder that was India* by A.L Basham⁴. This book studied the changing process of ancient pagodas in India.

Findings and Discussion

Nowadays, pagodas are built in the pyramid shape in Myanmar. It is an Indian design which is the shape of the heap of grain. After the *Parinibbāna* of the Buddha, the kings from eight states distributed the holy relics of the Buddha and enshrined them in the pagodas. So, these may be the first and foremost pagodas in Buddhism.

However, the most ancient one is *Sanchi* pagoda. It was built by Asoka (273-232 BC) in India. It was a brick building and its structure was a heap of grain. The lower part is a hemispherical shaped dome, the middle is a square box shaped and the top is a stick with triple umbrellas. It was surrounded by a wooden fence enclosing a path for the ceremonial clockwise circumambulation. It was the biggest one and was also very popular among 84,000 pagodas built by King Asoka. In

¹YadanaGonyee, 2006, p. 19

²Sārattha, Ṭī, I, 1990, 172. J, II, 1999, p. 228, p. 229

³Takathopadethasarsaung, Vol.10, part 2, 1975

⁴A.L Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, second edition, Canberra, 1966

order to protect the extreme weather, the king built the pagoda in the shape of the heap of crops. Therefore, it can be assumed that the earliest shape of pagodas is the shape of a heap of crops.

Over the years, the style of pagoda changed gradually. A simple shape of a heap of grain changed into the various styles with the architectural decoration. Some styles of pagodas are circular shaped, polygon shaped, tube of gun shaped and the shape of plantain bud.¹

Today, most of Myanmar pagodas are built in the pyramid shape. This style started to change during the reign of King Anawratha (1044-1077 AD). From that time on, the pagodas are constructed adding terraces and moldings. The art of building pagodas changed into Myanmar style. In many Bagan pagodas, we can find that the main pagodas are surrounded by many small pagodas including the ladders and gates for deity, including the parts of inverted alms bowl and bell-shaped structure. In this way, the pattern of Myanmar style changed too.²

This paper expressed the fact that Myanmar people have followed the instructions of the Buddha and these instructions (*Dhamma*) are used as the art of building pagodas and Buddha *dhamma* influenced in Myanmar's art and architecture design.

Most of the pagodas in Myanmar have sixteen significant parts. However, modern developed pagodas include many more parts in pagodas with the various and different meanings. For example, modern pagodas include: surrounding pagodas (အရံစေတီများ), capricorn terrace (မကန်းလှေကား), lion statue (ခြင်္သေ့) and *kalasar* pots (ကလာသာအိုးများ), and fane (တန်ဆောင်း). These parts are found in *Mahāvijayaramsīpathodawgyi* pagoda in Amarapura, Mandalay. Ornamental motif in stucco depicting an ogre head disgorging flowers and foliage (ဘီလူးပန်းကိုက်), catchment area (မိုးလျှော), big circle(ပတ်ကြီး), small circle(ပတ်သေး), lotus prong (ကြာစိပ်), spoon (ဇွန်း) are found in *Shwesegone* pagoda in Bagan. Terrace (ပစ္စယာ), circle shape (အဏ္ဏ-စက်ဝိုင်းခြမ်း), dome or enshrine (ဟာမိက-ဓာတ်တော်တိုက်) and umbrella tier upon tier (ဆတ္တဝလီ-ထီးအဆင့်ဆင့်) are found in *Rājacūlāmani* pagoda (Kaungmhudaw) in Sagaing. Furthermore, modern Myanmar pagodas have many new parts. They are diamond shape (မှန်ကူကွက်), lotus petal (ကြာဖက်), plinth (ဖိနပ်တော်), flower pot (ပန်းအိုး), flower bundle (ပန်း ခိုင်), vertical ornamental embellishments at corners (တုရင်/ထောင့်တိုက်), a lion's hindquarters (မနုဿိဟ), fane(တန်ဆောင်း), lower lotus (အောက်ကြာနု) and upper lotus (အထက်ကြာနု). Most of traditional Myanmar pagodas are, however, essentially composed of sixteen parts. In this paper, the researcher would mainly discuss these 16 traditional parts of pagodas. These are:

1. Plinth – ပန်းတင်ခုံ/ဖိနပ်တော်
2. Terrace – ပစ္စယာ
3. Octagonal – ကျဉ်းဝန်း
4. Bands – ခေါင်းလောင်းနား

¹The Wonder that was India, 1966, p. 351

²စေတီပုထိုးသမိုင်း၊ ၁၉၇၅၊ စာ၊ ၂၉

5. Bell – ခေါင်းလောင်း
6. Bell-shaped dome – ခါးစည်း/ရင်စည်း
7. Inverted alms bowl – သပိတ်မှောက်
8. Friezes – ဝန်းဆွဲ
9. Conical spire – ဖောင်းရစ်
10. Inverted lotus petal – ကြာမှောက်
11. Bosses – ရွဲ
12. Fulfilled bloomed lotus petal – ကြာလန်
13. Banana bud – ငှက်ပျောဖူး
14. Holy umbrella – ထီး
15. Jewelled Vane – ငှက်မြတ်နားတော် and
16. Diamond bud – စိန်ဖူးတော်.¹

Each part of the pagoda has profound sense from the religious point of view. The Shwe Dagon pagoda in Yangon is a typical style of Myanmar pagoda composed of the above-mentioned parts. Nowadays, the total parts of Shwe Dagon pagoda, however, became twenty. Surrounding pagodas (အရံစေတီများ), lotus prong (ကြာနု), the screw-pine (ဆတ်သွားဖူး) and spoon (စွန်း) were added by the donors (ahludagars).

1. Plinth

The lowest part of pagoda is called plinth. Since it is the base of the pagoda, it is called plinth. It is a square shape. At every corner of the plinth, a small statue of lion is placed. It is also a place to put the alms, flowers and other things donated to the Buddha. This is the Myanmar Buddhist culture of donating something to the pagoda when they worship and pray for something. So, the plinth is a place to wish something.

Picture of Typical Myanmar Pagoda with Sixteen Parts



2. Terrace

On the plinth, there is a ladder shaped part which was known as terrace. It looks like a ladder and has three steps. Their names are A-htad-pit-sa-yan (upper terrace), A-lae-pit-sa-yan (middle terrace) and Aut-pit-sa-yan (lower terrace). These three steps of terrace refer to the three kinds of craving: *kāmatanḥā* (sensual craving), *bhavatanḥā* (craving for existence) and *vibhavatanḥā* (craving for non-existence). Above the terrace, the bands and octagonal are placed. The terrace represents the craving of the life. These three kinds of craving are the real causes of suffering. Because of these cravings, we are facing the suffering of rebirth and death, and the suffering of getting existence and ending. Therefore, in order to remind the dangers or disadvantages of these cravings, the terrace is included in the pagoda.

3. Octagonal

Octagonal is the part of the pagoda having eight faces around the pagoda. Octagonal have eight layers and eight sides and all upper parts of Octagonal are circular shape. Above the octagonal, there are five bands which are in polygonal shaped. Eight faces with eight terraces means eight kinds of rebirth and death. These are *Aṇḍajapaṭisandhi* (rebirth from egg), *Jalābujapaṭisandhi* (rebirth from mother's womb), *Opapātikapaṭisandhi* (rebirth with invisible *Kamma* power), *Sam-sedajapaṭisandhi* (rebirth from moisture), *Āyukkhayacuti* (death by decaying of life), *Kammakkhayacuti* (death by decaying of *kamma*), *Ubbhakkhayacuti* (death by decaying of danger) and *Upacchedakakammacuti* (death by accident). The reason of building eight terraces in pagoda is to show four kinds of death and four kinds of rebirth. In other words, the intention of constructing octagonal is to remind the human beings eight kinds of above-mentioned sufferings as long as he is in the circle of life.

4. Bands

This part of pagoda is called bands. The bands part is composed of five circular coils. That five coils show the five kinds of existence: *Devagati* (celestial existence), *Manussagati* (human existence), *Petagati* (ghost and lower deity existence), *Tricchānagati* (animal existence) and *Nirayagati* (damned existence). The reason of building that part is to know that there are many existences in the world. A person who does good deed will gain good existence. Likewise, a person who does bad deed will get into bad existence. On the other hand, the bands encourage the human beings who are in the circle of the life to learn the *Dhamma* knowledge.

5. Bell

This part can be seen above the bands. Bell is built with the intention of sharing the merit of good deed. In the same way, the part of bell shaped dome is reminding the human beings to do ten items of meritorious actions in accordance with the Buddha's teaching. These are *dāna* (charity), *sīla* (morality), *bhavanā* (meditation), *apacāyana* (reverence), *veyyāvacca* (service), *pattidāna* (transference of merit), *pattānumodana* (rejoicing in other's merit), *dhammasavana* (listening to the doctrine), *dhammadesanā* (expounding the doctrine) and *diṭṭhijukamma* (straightening one's right view). Therefore, the part of bell is very significant in reminding all pilgrims to do ten meritorious deeds taught by the Buddha.

6. Bell-shaped Dome

The middle part of pagoda is called Bell-shaped dome. It represents three kinds of *sikkhā* (practice) that the Buddha taught: *sīlasikkhā* (morality), *samādhisikkhā* (consciousness) and *paññāsikkhā* (wisdom). The aim of building Bell-shaped dome in pagoda is to avoid doing bad deeds by doing three kinds of practice. Therefore, in order to remind three kinds of practice, the part of Bell-shaped dome is added in the design of the pagoda.

7. Inverted Alms Bowl

It is situated above the part of Bell-shaped dome. It refers to the abandoning described in the Buddha teaching. There are five kinds of abandoning. They are *pahāna* (abandoning), *tadaṅgapahāna* (abandoning by the opposite), *vikkhambhanapahāna* (abandoning by repression), *samucchedapahāna* (ab

andoning by destruction), *paṭissadhipahāna* (abandoning by tranquillization) and *nissaraṇapahāna* (abandoning by escape). The inverted alms bowl means no attachment. Therefore, it can be seen that this part of pagoda reminds us of the Buddha's teaching of unattachment.

8. Friezes

Friezes are placed on the inverted alms bowl. It is intended to represent the attaining the *bhayaṅyan* in those who has no attachment.

9. Conical Spire

It is placed above the part of inverted alms bowl. Its structure is like the rings. It is combined with seven steps of rings. Seven pieces of this part represent the seven stages of *visuddhimagga* (purification). There are seven stages of *visuddhimagga*: *sīlavisuddhi* (purification of morality), *cittaviddhi* (purification of mind), *diṭṭhivissuddhi* (purification of view), *kaṅkhāvitaraṇaviddhi* (purification of overcoming doubt), *maggāmaggañānadassanavisuddhi* (purification of knowledge and vision of what is path and not path), *paṭipadāñānadassanavisuddhi* (purification of knowledge and vision of path-progress) and *ñānadassanavisuddhi* (purification of knowledge and vision). Seven stages of *visuddhimagga* are the key to attain the knowledge of *maggaphala*. Therefore, it is placed under the part of inverted lotus petal. As the shape of pagoda is in pyramid shape, the conical spire steps are also in pyramid shape. As the conical spire represents the seven stages of *visuddhimagga*, it reminds the essence of purification so that it is put as a part of the pagoda.

10. Inverted Lotus Petal

Inverted lotus flower is a part of pagoda above the part of conical spire. It is the shape of petals, which are facing down round the pagoda. Its meaning is to illustrate the importance of the cultivating *samathabhāvanā*, which is the way to attain *Jhāna*. *Jhāna* is not the path to *Nibbāna*. Therefore, a person who is in this level is not safe and at anytime, he may go down to the lower level of existences. Therefore, the structure of this part is in the shape of an inverted lotus flower.

11. Bosses

Over the part of inverted lotus petal, there is a part called bosses. It is placed round the pagoda. The meaning of this part is to describe the knowledge of *Gotrabhū*. *Gotrabhū* is a kind of knowledge, which can be attained before attaining the eight kinds of *Maggaphala* knowledge. Therefore, it is placed under the lowest *magga* which is under *sotāpattimagga* (fulfilled bloomed lotus petal).

12. Fulfilled Bloomed Lotus Petal

This part is found over the bosses. Its structure is the opposite of inverted lotus flower. The meaning of that part is the knowledge of *Sotāpatimagga*, a remaining *Magga* from above *Maggaphalas*. *Magga* is the goal of Buddhism. *Sotāpatimagga* is one of *Magga*. So *Sotāpatimagga* is represented by lotus flower.

13. Banana Bud

A banana bud is found under the umbrella of pagoda. It looks like banana bud. The part of banana bud denotes the beginning of *Maggaphala*. It reminds a person who is trying to attain *Maggaphala*, but he does not succeed yet. It

represents such kind of situation so that its shape is similar to the banana bud, meaning waiting for the time to blossom.

14. Holy Umbrella

This part of pagoda is found over the banana bud. Holy umbrella is the combination of seven pieces of golden coils. At the ring of the holy umbrella, many golden bells are hanging down. Seven steps of holy umbrellas pointed out seven steps of *Maggaphalas*. These are seven different kinds of knowledge which are necessary to attain *Nibbāna*, namely: *Sotāpatimagga*, *Sotāpattiphala*, *Sakadāgāmmimagga*, *Sakadāgāmmiphala*, *Anāgāmmimagga*, *Anāgāmmiphala* and *Maggaphala*. Holy umbrella gives shade and protects heat. In the same way, seven steps of *Maggaphalas* can protect the heat of suffering and make feel calm and cool like staying in the shape. Therefore, holy umbrella is included as a part of the pagoda in order to illustrate the seven steps of *Maggaphala*.

15. Jewelled Vane

Jewelled Vane is found above the holy umbrella. It represents the place where the Buddha and Arahant persons go after attaining enlightenment. The place that the Buddha and Arahant persons went is closely situated to *nibbāna*. According to that interpretation, the part of jewelled vane is placed beneath the diamond bud.

16. Diamond Bud

Diamond bud is placed at the top of the pagoda. It shaped like a rose bud. That part of pagoda refers to *Nibbāna*. It is the supreme part of the pagoda. In this way, *nibbāna* is supreme in the life and the final goal of a Buddhist. Diamond orb and *nibbāna* are the same supreme. Therefore, the part of diamond orb in pagoda is added to represent the *nibbāna*.¹ These days, most of the Buddhists go to the pagodas to pay homage but they do not know the meanings and intention of these parts of pagodas. This paper explained and pointed out that sixteen parts of pagodas have significant definitions and these are related to Buddhist teachings. Nowadays, the designs of the pagodas change depending on architectural designs and donor imagination. Although most of the pagodas are composed of the above-mentioned sixteen parts, many modern pagodas included more ornament parts in pagoda's design.

Conclusion

Since the Buddha time, Buddhist people have paid homage to the Buddha in various ways. They also created the images and figurines, which represent the Buddha. Buddhists prohibit the representation of the Buddha in common human form. Among so many symbols represented to the Buddha, pagoda is a kind of symbols. This paper presented four kinds of pagodas in Buddhism and discussed in detail the kind of pagoda which enshrines images and symbols called *uddissacetiya* (an image and symbols). Besides, it differentiates the practice of paying homage of pagoda in the pre-Buddhist time and Buddhist time. With the development of pagoda designs, the donors build the pagoda with various senses and meanings. This paper emphasizes the meaning and significance of sixteen parts of the pagoda. The other parts of pagoda, which are added in modern pagodas, are also needed to study in further researches.

^၁မဟာဝိဇယရံသီပုထိုးတော်ကြီးမြတ်စွာဘုရားသမိုင်း၊ ၂၀၀၉၊ စာ၊ ၁၂၉-၁၄၄

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ဥာဏ်မြင့်၊ (၂၀၀၉) “*မဟာဝိဇယရုံသီပုထိုးတော်ကြီးမြတ်စွာဘုရားသမိုင်း*”၊ နယူးဘားမားအေ့ဆက်ပုံနှိပ်တိုက်၊ အမရပူရမြို့၊ မန္တလေး။

ဟုတ်စိန်ဦး၊ (၁၉၅၄) “*ပဒတ္တဗညုသာဝါဠိမြန်မာအဘိဓာန်*”၊ သာသနာရေးဦးစီးဌာနပုံနှိပ်တိုက်၊ ရန်ကုန်မြို့။

“*မြန်မာအဘိဓာန်*”၊ (၂၀၀၈)၊ မြန်မာစာအဖွဲ့ဦးစီးဌာန၊ ရန်ကုန်မြို့။

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