

The Mahamuni

Introduction

The Mahamuni Buddha image which is now in the Kyun-Lon U-Shaung quarter, ward no. 508 of Chan Mya Tha-si township of Mandalay is undoubtedly the most famous and venerated Buddha image in the whole of Myanmar even as the Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Yangon is the most revered *chedi*. Maha in Pali means "Great" and Muni means "Sage" one of the attributes of the Buddha," the Great Sage."

Although the Mahamuni has been in its present shrine for about 217 years, it originated in far-away Rakhine, the westernmost state of Myanmar, bordering India and Bangladesh. The image, according to legendary sources, was cast in 554 B.C., and so it was in its original shrine probably near Kyauktaw in Rakhine for about 2338 years until 1784 AD when King Bodawpaya (1782-1819 AD) sent his eldest son, the Crown Prince (the Prince of Shwe Daung) to conquer the Rakhine Kingdom and bring back the Mahamuni image to his capital Amarapura.

To trace the history of this treasured sacred image, one needs to know the Mahamuni tradition, the legend of how the image was cast in the presence of Gaudama Buddha over 2,500 years ago.

The Mahamuni Tradition

The legend of the Buddha's week-long sojourn in Rakhine and the casting of the Mahamuni image, with Buddha Himself presiding over this momentous emprise forms one of the oldest Buddhist traditions in Myanmar.¹

The legend has been related in various chronicles and old Buddhist texts, especially in *Sappadana pakarana (Sarvasthana-prakaana)* an ancient Rakhine manuscript on the Mahamuni *thamaing* (a history of the image and the shrine).¹

¹ See Appendix (1) for Dr. Emil Forchhammer's ably translated account of this legend.

¹ Apart from Dr. Forchhammer's translation, see also San Shwe Bu. "The story of Mahamuni", *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, vol. VI (1916) p.225-229. In

The Buddhist people of Myanmar have accepted legendary accounts of the Buddha visiting various parts of Myanmar, though scholars after much research write that Gaudama Buddha (c.563- c. 483 BC) probably never left his homeland, the area between Kapilavastu and Benares about a hundred miles away in Northern India and Nepal.

The full text of this tradition is given in Appendix 1. Here I will give only a gist. According to the Mahamuni tradition the Buddha accompanied by his brother and closest disciple Shin Ānanda with 500 *rahans* (monks) made an aerial journey to Rakhine and alighted on the summit of the Selagiri Hill opposite Kyauktaw town.

The Rakhine King Sanda Thuriya (Candrasuriya) of Dhanyawadi (Dhanyavati) accompanied by Sandra Mala (Candramala), the Chief Queen with her 1,600 hand maidens, the King's ministers and numerous followers went to pay homage to the Great Teacher. After residing in the King's capital, the Buddha made preparations to return to Tha-wut-hti (Sṛāvastī) and the King supplicated: "Oh Lord if you wander about from place to place in distant countries we shall have no opportunity to pay homage to you. Therefore, for my own good and that of others, I pray you to leave an image of yourself".

The Buddha readily agreed making the King and the people of Rakhine joyous. So preparations were immediately made. The Buddha called on two heavenly Lords, Sakra (Indra) the King of the divine beings, and Visvakarman, the celestial architect, ordering them to make an image with the treasures donated by the King, Royalty and populace. This image, the Buddha stipulated, "shall not vary from the actual size of my body even by the breadth of a hair."

After the image had been cast the Blessed One desirous of imparting some of his glory to the image, breathed upon it, when Lo! and behold! the image was transformed into a life-like one, so life-like indeed that there appeared before the peoples' eyes two Buddhas, the Buddha in person and his golden bronze image.

Myanmar see Shin Sandamala-lingara. *Rakhine yazawin thit kyan*....vol I. Mandalay: Hanthawaddy, 1932.p.247-269.

When the Buddha got up to depart the image slowly rose in the air as if possessed of life and about to follow, but the Buddha ordered the image to remain in Rakhine saying: “Younger brother (i.e. the Mahamuni) do not stand up. I shall enter Nirvana in my eightieth year; but you endowed with the supernatural powers of a Buddha, shall exist for 5,000 years, which I have prescribed to be the limit of my *Sasana* (religion); you shall be the means of working for the salvation of men and nats”. The Buddha also told the image that it will suffer desecration because the Buddha in a previous existence as a King of Cheduba Island in Rakhine broke the thigh-bone of a gardener and sliced off a piece of flesh from the back of a young prince; because of the results of Kamma Vipaka of these two evil deeds the image shall and did eventually suffer the consequences of these two evil deeds as foretold by the Buddha.

The Buddha named the image **Candasara** and left it in Rakhine as his representative on earth and the Buddhist people of Myanmar venerate it up to now as the first and only true image of the Buddha.¹

The Rakhine chronicles gave 146-198 A.D. as the dates of King Sanda Thuriya's (Candrasuriya meaning the Moon and the Sun) reign in Dhanyawadi. As 483 BC is usually accepted as the date of the Buddha's death or entering Nirvana, there is a discrepancy of about six hundred years.²

Modern scholars date the Dhanyawadi Dynasty as from about mid-4th to early 6th century A.D. Stylistically the Mahamuni image is datable to about mid-4th century A.D.³ Even if the image was not made during the life-time of the Buddha, it is still by far the earliest Buddha image in Myanmar.

In the main Myanmar proper of the Ayeyawady valley excavations at early Pyu sites like Beikthano (1st to 5th century A.D.) and Halin (2nd to 9th century A.D.) have not produced any finds which can be identified as

¹ Emil Forchhammer. *Report on the Antiquities of Arakan*. I. Mahamuni Pagoda. Yangon: Govt. Print., 1892. p.4-5.

² San Shwe Bu. “The Story of Mahamuni”, *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, vol. VI (1916) p.226.

³ Dr. Pamela Gutman. *Burma's Lost Kingdoms: Splendours of Arakan*. Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2001.p.7.

Buddha images. Only at Srikshetra (5th to 9th century A.D.) Buddha images have been found which can be assigned to the 7th and 9th centuries.¹

Mahamuni in Rakhine

8th to 18th century

There are many references to the Mahamuni in Rakhine chronicles and also a few in Myanmar chronicles like U Kala (1714-33)'s *Mahayazawin Gyi*, *The Hmannan Yazawin* (1829) and *Konbaungset Yazawin* compiled by U Maung Maung Tin (1921).

Although the Mahamuni image was supposed to be have been made during Buddha's time as legendary sources contend, none of the histories of the image and the shrine or the main Myanmar and Rakhine chronicles are able to give any records pertaining to it for over a thousand years until the 8th century A.D. From the 8th to the 18th century Rakhine history is closely intertwined with the history of the Mahamuni, for the Rakhine kings even after they had shifted their capital from Dhanyawadi to Vesali and Mrauk-U continued to make frequent pilgrimages to the shrine and to build and repair both the image and the religious buildings which housed the image and those which were connected to it, like the Pitaka Taik Library built by King Minkhari in 1439 A.D., the Upasampada Simas or Ordination Halls and so on. The Mahamuni tradition was at the centre of the Rakhine Royal Court, the image the palladium of the country.

King Mahataingcandra who founded the new city of Vesali in 789A.D. rebuilt the Mahamuni image-house twice. He also had a new stone altar made for the image.

It is interesting to note that after the kings of Bagan had been converted to the Theravada form of Buddhism they sent two ministers Laksaka and Majalon to the Mahamuni pagoda in Rakhine with instructions to replace (or remodel) figures of Bodhisattvas and nat

¹ U Aung Thaw. *Historical Sites in Burma*. Yangon: Ministry of Union Culture, 1972. p.6, 13, 15, 16 etc. Also by the same author. *Excavations at Beikthano*. Yangon: Central Press, 1968.

guardian spirits into images of Buddha. The King of Vesali, Sanghataingcandra (935-951 A.D.) opposed their efforts and only two stone figures were chiselled into Buddha images.¹ Today we find that most of the early Mahayanist sculptures that were in the Mahamuni shrine have had their Mahayanist features and attributes chiselled off so that they are in conformity with the Theravadin tradition.² A number of these sculptures were left behind when the main Mahamuni image was taken to Amarapura, and can still be seen in its shrine near Kyauk-taw.

Not only Rakhine kings but Myanmar kings also took part in repairing the original Mahamuni shrine in Rakhine.

Anawrahta (1044-77 A.D.) the great Myanmar monarch who founded the Bagan Dynasty came to the Mahamuni shrine in person to superintend the rebuilding of the temple. He also erected a prayer hall “in front of shrine, surmounted by a richly carved graduated turret”.³

King Alaungsithu (1112-67 A.D.) erected a four-sided building over the image, repaired the approaches to the shrine and planted many champak trees around it.⁴

The fame of the Mahamuni and its treasures became so well known that it was raided several times by Theks, Shans, Pyus and Mons. For example during the reign of King Paipyu (964-994 A.D.) many Shan invaders settled to the east of the Mahamuni shrine and are said to have carried away the treasures buried under the altar by King Sanda Thuriya.⁵

During the reign of Letyaminnan, the Rakhine king (ascended the throne in 1103 A.D.) a hundred thousand Pyus and an equal number of Mons came to help Letyaminnan, but later they could not resist the temptation to despoil the Mahamuni of its vast wealth. The Pyus even scooped out gold from a greater portion of the image’s back and the Mons cut off the whole right leg and carried it back to their country.⁶ This

¹ Emil Forchhammer. *Report on the Antiquities of Arakan...* 1892. p.6.

² Pamela Gutman. *Burma’s Lost Kingdoms: Splendours of Arakan...* 2001. p.35.

³ Forchhammer. *Report on the Antiquities of Arakan...* 1892. p.6.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.6.

⁵ *Ibid.* p.6.

⁶ San Shwe Bu. “The Story of Mahamuni”...1916. p.227.

happened, according to the legendary histories written much later, in fulfillment of the Buddha's prophecy.

Even a famous image like the Mahamuni came to be lost, sometimes for a number of years, during the frequent warfare between the city states of the region. When Letyaminnan became king at his capital Ping-tsa he had to send out search parties led by his ministers to find the Mahamuni. With the assistance of two Mro tribesmen the image was found buried in the ground up to the neck. The King therefore repaired the image and conveyed it by boats on rivers and streams to Dhanyawadi. This becomes the second rebuilding of the Mahamuni, and the shrine complex minus the great image can be seen today about six miles east of Kyauktaw, and twenty-one miles north of Mrauk-U.¹

Some scholars like Forchhammer state that this major repair of the image and the shrine took place only in 1153 A.D. by King Dasaraja of the Parin Dynasty.²

King Minbin who ascended the Rakhine throne in 1536 A.D. ordered numerous stone images to be made modelled on the Mahamuni and they were sent to various pagodas in Rakhine. Today numerous replica images of the Mahamuni can be seen both in Rakhine State and all over Myanmar.

In this short paper I can only touch on some of the important events in the history of the Mahamuni. Those who would like to read fuller accounts should consult Emil Forchhammer(1892), Chan Htwan Oung (1912), and San Shwe Bu (1916) all written in English and also U Maung Maung Tin (M.A)'s *Mandalay MahamuniPaya gyi Thamaing (History of the Mahamuni Pagoda)* in Myanmar published in 1996. (See full bibliographical data in the attached Bibliography).

Conveyance of the Mahamuni to Amarapura 1785 A.D.

The fame of the Mahamuni attracted the kings of neighbouring states to not only come and worship at the image, but encouraged a strong

¹ *Ibid.* p. 228.

² Emil Forchhammer. *Report on the Antiquities of Arakan...* 1892. p.6.

desire to take it back to their capital cities. Kings from Sriksheetra, Bagan and Hanthawaddy all tried to conquer Rakhine so that they could take possession of this famed image which tradition asserts to be a contemporary likeness of the founder of their faith. Each in turn had failed until the reign of King Bodawpaya (1782-1819 A.D.). The plan to take the Mahamuni to the Myanmar capital was probably contemplated as early as the reign of King Hsinbyushin (1763-76 A.D.) the King who conquered Ayudhya in 1767. On 12th September 1774 King Hsinbyushin sent an envoy, Thurain Setka, with a letter by Maha Athinkhaya enquiring about the Rakhine Kingdom, expressing a special desire to obtain a detailed history of the Mahamuni.¹

On 16th October 1784 King Badon or Bodawpaya passed a Royal Order appointing the Crown Prince Thiri Maha Dhammar-bi-zaya Thihathuya (the Prince of Shwedaung) as Commander-in-Chief to march with his land and sea forces to Rakhine, commencing the Rakhine Campaign. The reason given in the Royal Order was “to restore proper conditions in Rakhine for the prosperity of the Buddha’s religion.”² He also wanted to move the Mahamuni, the Great Image, from Kyauktaw to Amarapura, his capital.³

King Bodawpaya believed like the Rakhine kings that the Mahamuni had magical powers which protected the Rakhine State. He sent in advance of his troops spies and persons endowed with occult powers, some disguised as monks, to the Mahamuni shrine to neutralize the magical potency of the image.⁴

On 21st December 1784 the Crown Prince and his forces captured Dhanyawadi and preparations were immediately made to remove the Mahamuni after proper propitiation ceremonies had been performed. The Mahamuni started on its journey to Amarapura on 22nd January 1785.⁵ It

¹ U Maung Maung Tin (M.A.). *Mandalay Mahamuni Paya-gyi thamaing...* 1996. p. 16-18. A full text of this letter is given as copied from an old parabaik paper manuscript.

² Dr. Than Tun. *The Royal Orders of Burma A.D. 1598-1885. Part 4, A.D. 1782-1787...* 1986. p.75.

³ *Ibid.* p.xvii.

⁴ G.E. Harvey. *History of Burma...* 1925.p.267.

⁵ U Maung Maung Tin. *Mandalay Mahamuni Paya-gyi thamaing...* 1996. p.26.

was first conveyed on a special raft down the Kaladan River to the sea, and along the coast to the town of Taungup, where a rough road had been hewn out of the Rakhine Yoma mountains to Padaung on the Ayeyawady River.¹

There is a detailed account of this perilous journey, the image being hauled by over 5,000 soldiers and conscripted labour up narrow precipitous paths. The image on a sledge (some say in three broken down parts) was hauled and rolled along on logs from camp to camp, from mountain to mountain. This conveyance of the Mahamuni from Rakhine to the Myanmar capital is related in a parabaik manuscript prepared for the Head of the Buddhist Sasana (religion), the Maung Daung Thathana-paing, and later found at a monastery in Thakhut-tanai which was donated by this chief monk.² A detailed record has also been written in English by Dr. Than Tun.³ From Taungup to Padaung 54 camps were established along the mountainous pass, the highest point about 3,834 feet above sea level; it took about the same number of days for the Mahamuni to be pulled across this most difficult part of its journey. It was quite a feat, for at the time there were no mechanized means of transportation and only manual labour was used.

According to noted scholar and Superintendent of Myanmar Archaeological Survey Taw Sein Ko, the back part of the head of the image was smashed on the way but it was patched up with *thitse* and gold leaf.⁴

From Padaung two large Karaweik Barges joined together were used to ceremonially convey the image upstream along the Ayeyawady River to Amarapura. The river voyage started on 8th April 1785 and reached the jetty of the Royal Capital on 7th May 1785, the voyage taking

¹ Dr. Than Tun. "Paya lanma (Lord's highway) over the Yoma (Yakhine Range)", *Journal of the Asian and African Studies*, vol.25 (1983) p. 233-41, with a detailed map of the route.

² U Maung Maung Tin. *Mandalay Mahamuni Paya-gyi thamaing*...1996. p.20.

³ Dr. Than Tun. "Paya lanma (Lord's highway) over the Yoma (Yakhine Range)", *Journal of the Asian and African Studies*, vol.25 (1983) p. 233-41.

⁴ Taw Sein Ko. *Burmese sketches* [vol.1]...1913.p. 279.

a total of exactly (30) days.¹ In all the journey from Kyauktaw to Amarapura took over (4) months.²

King Bodawpaya like King Anawrahta reverently receiving the Buddha tooth relic, waded down into the Ayeyawady River up to his neck at Sagaing to respectfully welcome the twin Karaweik barges carrying the Mahamuni image. He then built a special shrine at an appropriate, auspicious place one thousand *ta* north of his capital Amarapura. This is the same site where the Mahamuni has been enshrined up to the present.³ Now of course it is part of Mandalay city.

Dr. Htin Aung has written in his *History of Burma* that all over Rakhine the people wept when the Mahamuni, their national treasure, was taken away from them. Some Rakhine people allege that even the Great Image shed tears.⁴ Some of the ultra nationalist Rakhines maintain that the real Mahamuni is still somewhere in their land and that only a replica was taken to the Myanmar capital.⁵

Mahamuni in Amarapura and Mandalay

Late 18th century to the present

From the time of King Bodawpaya (1782-1819) the last six kings of Myanmar to King Thibaw (1878-1885) looked after the Mahamuni as the most sacred image of the country, lavishing valuable adornments like a new richly bejewelled *magike* (golden crown), a *salwe* sash (an insignia of honour); also constructing a number of elaborately decorated buildings like prayer halls, the main shrine with nine tiered *pyatthat* spire-like roof, monasteries, ornamental ceiling for the main shrine, three *maha-yan* enclosure walls, four colonnaded covered pathways with places for stalls selling flowers, incense and other offerings for the Buddha image. Not

¹ U Maung Maung Tin. *Mandalay Mahamuni Paya-gyi thamaing...*1996. p.29.

² Ashin Pandissa. *Mahamuni thamaing-daw thit*. Mandalay: Thamada Press [1950]. p.60.

³ U Maung Maung Tin (KSM). *Konbaung-zet Maha Yazawin-daw-gyi*. Vol. III. 3rd ed. Yangon: Ledi Mandaing Press, 1967. p. 18.

⁴ Dr. Htin Aung. *A History of Burma*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967. p.197.

⁵ U Maung Maung Tin. *Mandalay Mahamuni Paya-gyi thamaing...*1996. p.30-31.

Various Rakhine theories of the Mahamuni being still in their land can be read in this compilation.

only the kings, but the queens and some high ranking members of the Myanmar Royalty and some of the Shan Sawbwas took part in donating munificently to the Mahamuni and its shrine. After reaching the Myanmar capital the Mahamuni not only became better known because it was more easily accessible to pilgrims from all over the country and for visitors from abroad. At the same time the Mahamuni and its shrine complex grew in inestimable wealth and it became necessary to guard its treasures in time of warfare and political turmoil.

Compared to its thousand years turbulent history from 8th to 18th century when the treasures of the image were looted and the image itself desecrated, its one hundred years in the Myanmar capital under Myanmar kings were fairly peaceful and tranquil. The only exception was a disastrous fire which engulfed parts of Mandalay and eventually reached the shrine in 1884, nearly a hundred years after the image had reached its present shrine. The head and parts of the body were damaged; the melted down gold was collected and put back later.¹

During the British colonial times from 1886 to 1948, a Board of Pagoda Trustees under the guidance of presiding Sayadaws and Senior Buddhist monks, carefully looked after the Mahamuni and its treasures. At the outbreak of the Second World War when the British retreated and there was no law and order, the monks organized and guarded the whole shrine complex right up to the time Myanmar regained her Independence in 1948.

The Mahamuni is called by the local people in Mandalay as “Paya-gyi” the big pagoda, or Rakhine Pagoda, (the Arakan Pagoda). Some have put in the word “Myat” meaning “noble” and call it Maha Myat Muni, but it is not the correct title.²

Before concluding my paper I would like to give a few dimensions of this famed image. The height is 12 feet 7 inches, breadth from shoulder

¹ See Max and Bertha Ferrars. *Burma...* 1901. p.99-100. Also Ashin Pandissa. *Mahamuni thamaing daw thit...*[1950]. p.65-67.

² Shwe-gaing-tha. *Yatanabon Po Hmat Su i Mandalay...* [1976] p.153.

to shoulder is over 6 feet, and at its base the breadth is over 9 feet.¹ The dimensions at the base are getting larger because of the daily applications of gold leaf by hundreds of devotees. The masonry pedestal throne on which the image sits in the *bhumisparsa mudra* is nearly 7 feet high. Buddhist people have a special epithet for the image, it is a *yoke-shin-daw*, meaning “a royal image which has life”, recalling the legend of how the Buddha breathed life into the image when it was first cast. This belief has given rise to the face-washing ceremony every morning at around 4.30 a.m. just before dawn, when even the brazen teeth of the image are carefully brushed by the presiding Sayadaw.

Conclusion

The Mahamuni in recent years have had its whole shrine renovated. It is being venerated more than ever before. During its festival in February or early March it is so thronged with devotees that it is difficult to get inside the shrine.

Close circuit TV cameras have been installed so that devotees, especially women who are not allowed into the inner sanctum, can worship its golden image in front of TV monitors.

With the opening up of the country more visitors, especially Buddhist pilgrims, come from abroad to worship the image.

In 1954 the Buddhist *Sasana* celebrated 2,500 years of its existence. The Mahamuni also reached at the time, half of its prophesied age of 5,000 years. Up to now its fame and glory remains undiminished.

¹ Burma Gazetteer. *The Mandalay District*. Vol.A. Compiled by H.F.Searle. Yangon: Govt. Print., 1928. p.241.

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Appendix (I)

The Mahamuni TraditionThe Legend of How the Mahamuni Buddha Image was Cast¹By Emil Forchhammer²

Candrasuriya, hearing of the great teacher Gotama, yearned to pay homage to him, and to present him with rich offerings. Buddha, while dwelling in Srāvastī (Sāvattihī), became aware, by his divine power to perceive the thoughts of others, of the intentions of Candrasuriya. The teacher said to his chief disciple Ānanda: "The king will have to pass regions full of danger to travellers; large rivers will impede his journey, and the ocean is ruled by nāgas inimical to seafarers: let us betake ourselves to the dominions of the king, so that he may execute his pious intentions without being compelled to undertake so dangerous a journey." Then Gotama, accompanied by Ānanda and 500 rahans, flew through the air and alighted on the summit of the Selagīri (the hill opposite Kyauktaw) Here he held a discourse with his disciples and then addressed Ānanda thus: "Ānanda, to the west of the Gacchabha river, which flows past this hill, there is a plain; here have I in former existences been born many times. One yojana distant from this Selagīri, whereon we are now standing, there is a mountain called Mallapabbata; on this hill a pagoda will be built to receive as relics the hair from both sides of my head; the shrine will be called Uzundawcetī (ဦးစွမ်းတော်စေတီ); near the Mallapabbata is another hill called Veluvannapabbata, where during one of my births I lived as a Zapagyi serpent (ဝါးကြီး: boa constrictor; actually a python); on

¹ Extract from *Report on the antiquities of Arakan*. I. Mahamuni Pagoda, by Emil Forchhammer. Rangoon: Govt. Press, 1892.p.2-5.

² Emil Forchhammer was a Swiss Linguist who became the Professor of Pali at Rangoon College and later the Chief Government Archaeologist soon after the Dept. of Archaeological Survey was established in Myanmar during the British colonial period.

its summit the Nāsaceti will be built, containing as relic my nasal bone. Near this again is a hill called Gandhagiri, where I lived as a Granzin

(ငြန်ဆင် = Burm. ငြံဆင်, the single-horned rhinoceros) during one of my births ; on this hill the Kannadhātuceti will be erected holding as relic my left ear. On the southern side of this hill and more than a yojana distant there is a low range of hills named Sālamaya; there I lived in a former existence as a gardener; in aftertimes my camrutdhāt (စမြတ်?) will be enshrined here in a pagoda to be called the Camutīceti. Further to the south and near the Gacchabhanadī there is a steep rocky hill known as the Selapabbata ; there I lived when in a former life I was born as a Brahman versed in the Vedas; the skull, measuring 18 inches in circumference, still remains there and will be enshrined in a pagoda to be named the Urājtaungceti (Urittaungceti ဥရာဇ်တောင်စေတီ). On the western side of this hill and at a distance of about 3 leagues there is a river called the Mallayu (now called Mayu). On the eastern bank of this river is the Rājapabbata (now Yathètaung); on this mountain I lived during one of my births as a Chaddanta elephant. When I die the frontal bone of this elephant will be found and enshrined in a tabernacle bearing the name Ugintawceti (ဦးကင်းတော်စေတီ). On the western side of the Mallayu (or Rammamallayu) river, and close to the ocean, there is a range of hills known as the Kāsinapabbata; there I formerly spent a life as the King of the peacocks. On my death my neckbone will be discovered and enshrined there in a pagoda to be called the Līyodawceti (လည်းရှိုးတော်စေတီ)."

Thus the Blessed One spoke to Ānanda ; and at the end of this prophesy the great earth with mount Meru as its centre trembled and shook, and the sea became hot and boiled.

On perceiving these portentous signs King Mahācandrasuriya took alarm and asked his astrologers what their cause might be. They answered that the signs were caused by the advent of the Blessed One (Gotama) ; and on his expressing a wish to go and adore the teacher, the propitious time for his intended visit was named to him after consulting the *nakshatras*.

Surrounded by 1,600 maidens with Candramālā , the chief queen, at their head, preceded by his numerous ministers, Mahācandrasuriya went to do homage to the great teacher. On his way he experienced great fatigue, and after calling for a halt he took his meal. During his meal he omitted to eat his rice-gruel, so to this day the place where he halted is called Hingmasâ (၁၇၆:၈၈၇). From that place he moved on. The noise caused by his fourfold army, consisting of elephants, horses, chariots, and foot-soldiers, was deafening and seemed to fill the skyey dome; hence to this day that place is known as Yôppyin (၃၄၆:၆၆). He continued his journey and came to a large place, where dust arose on all sides and enshrouded him and his men in utter darkness. As he could no longer see his way, even there he did homage to the Blessed One. The Blessed One knew about this so he sent his aureole rays to dispel the darkness. And the darkness being dispelled the king moved on. That spot is to this day known as Munbyin (၅၆၆:၆၆). Thence he proceeded with great swiftness and duly arrived in the presence of the Blessed One. He approached him on foot holding flowers and perfumes in his hands; he embraced the teacher's feet and ordered parched rice, garlands, and perfumes to be showered upon him. The Blessed One established the king in the five, eight, and ten sīlas, and preached to him the ten rules of kingly conduct. Candrasuriya became transported with joy and addressed the teacher thus: " O great King of righteousness, do have compassion on me and my subjects, and vouchsafe to honour my capital with a visit." And the Blessed One consented to do so.

The histories minutely relate all the incidents of Gotama's seven days' sojourn in Dhānyavati I omit them here as unessential. The records then continue thus: When Buddha made preparations to depart, the king, who with his court and all his subjects had been converted to the new religion, spoke thus to him: " O Lord, who is the crown, light, and glory of the three kinds of beings, if you wander about from place to place in distant countries, we shall have no one to pay homage to. Therefore, for my own good and that of others, I would pray you to leave us an image of you."

The Blessed One heard the prayer and in his omniscient wisdom thought thus : " An image of mine called Candasāra was at one time in the country of the Ditthi King, so Sakra has hidden it on a golden throne ; it is thus that kings can no longer adore it. Therefore it behoves me that I in this country, which is more excellent than the rest of the 84,000 countries, and which has been the scene of my various transmigrations, should leave my image and hair, which, I am fully convinced, will be held in veneration by men, nats, and Brahmans, during the 5,000 years subsequent to my Nirvāna. I will comply with the king's request."

Candrasuriya was overjoyed ; he ordered nine kutis worth of treasure to be collected. When all was ready Buddha called upon Sakra and Visvakarman, and issued to them the following order: Take these treasures and with them make an image which shall not vary from the actual size of my body even by the breadth of a hair." He then handed the treasures to Sakra, seven armfuls in all. They were placed in golden baskets overlaid with flowers and white cloth, and placed on the back of a white elephant under the umbrage of a white umbrella. With the intention of detaining the Blessed One just till the image was finished, Sakra and Visvakarman created by their supernatural power a pleasant pavilion on the Sirigutta hill situated to the north-east of the city of Dhānyavatī (Pāli Dhaññavatī). The pavilion was adorned with every decoration which human and celestial ingenuity could devise ; and in it for seven days dance, music, and song were held, and the five kinds of musical instruments sent forth their harmonious strain.

The Sīrigutta hill was so called because it was as white as fine silver and looked like a conch-shell whose spiral winding is towards the right. The hill was also called Agganutta ; formerly its name was Trikumbhanda because the features of the hill seemed to present three ogres standing abreast. Another name for it was Sīharājā, owing to a stone figure on the summit representing the lion-king roaring and devouring its prey. The hillock was likewise called Wakthāzo because there was a figure representing a female hog suckling her young, and Wakthadotaung by reason of our Prā having in a former existence lived there as a hog-king surrounded by 500 companions and escaped from being devoured by

a tiger — the Devadatta in embryo — by making a subterranean hole and seeking refuge therein.

On this Sirigutta hill, King Candrasuriya being then in the 51st year of his reign, Sakra and Visvakarman cast an image of the Blessed One ; the event took place in the year 118 Kosasakkarajgyi. Being desirous of imparting some of his glory to the image, the great teacher breathed upon the image, when lo! the image was transformed into a life-like one, so life-like indeed that to the eyes of men, nats, Sakra, and Brahma there appeared two Prās. The king and his attendants were filled with joy and offered the image various kinds of flowers and perfumes, coloured parched rice, torches, lamps, cloth from Urasa, &c., and shouted 'sādhu, sādhu.' Again the earth trembled and shook, and King Candrasuriya, full of faith and overawed by these miraculous signs, embraced the holy feet of the Blessed One and became lost in rapture. When he had regained his consciousness he placed the image on a jeweled throne, built an elaborately carved turret above it, erected monasteries well furnished with the eight priestly utensils, and entrusted the inmates, holy Rahans, with the custody of the sacred shrine.

While the great teacher gazed upon the image it slowly rose as if possessed of life and stood in the attitude of welcoming his elder brother (Gotama) ; and the Omniscient One stretched out his right hand, waved his hand, and said (to the image) : " Younger brother, do not stand up. I shall enter Nirvāna in my eightieth year ; but you, endowed with the supernatural powers of a Buddha, shall exist for 5,000 years, which I have prescribed to be the limit of my religion ; you shall be the means of working the salvation of men and nats." After delivering this prophecy the Blessed One continued : "In one of my former existences I was a king on the island of Cheduba. I broke the thigh-bone of a gardener and sliced off a piece of flesh from the back of a young prince ;you (addressing the image) are my representative on earth and you shall suffer the results (Kammavipāka) of these two evil deeds." Gotama then preached a sermon on the Candasāra image — for so he named it — it is the first and only true image of Buddha.

King Candrasuriya offered the remainder of the nine kutis of treasure to the Rahandas in charge of the shrine ; but they refused to

accept it. The king, feeling that it was improper for him to appropriate the treasures intended for the Three Gems, buried them under the throne of the image.

Then the Blessed One addressed his disciples this : " O Rahans, my beloved sons! in the island of Jambûdîpa and among the 16 countries of Mjjhimadesa the food offered to the priesthood consists of a mixture of maize, beans, corn, and millet. But in this country the food offered consists of various kinds of barley and rice ; such food is eaten by the priests with relish ; my preceding elder brothers (Kakusandha, Gonagamanà, and Kassapa, *i.e.*, the three Buddhas who preceded Gotama) have called this country Dhaññavatī, and as the inhabitants have never suffered from famine, this region shall in all times to come continue to be called Dhaññavatī (*i.e.*, the grain-blessed).

Gotama then rose with his disciples and flew through the air in the direction of Dvāravatī (*i.e.*, Sandoway). Flying along the banks of the Dvāravatī river he stood awhile on a small hillock, which is to this day known as the Tantawmutaung. Standing on that hill the Blessed One smiled and Ānanda, reverencing him with the five tokens of respect, asked him the cause, and Buddha vouchsafed this answer : " Ānanda, I, who am your elder brother, was many a time in former existences a king of men in this very city ; in one of my births I was a harmadryad-king on the Pāsura hill ; on my death my molar tooth shall come to be enshrined on that hill in a pagoda to be called the Andawceti. Not far from the Pasura hill is the Lokūla hillock, where I once lived as a partridge-king ; when I die my nāmadhātu (rib-relic?) shall be enshrined there in pagoda to be called the Nandawceti. Not far from thence, in a south-easterly direction, is the Munikesa hill, where I lived in one of my former births as a Shwèzamarī (yak-ox). There a hair relic of mine will become enshrined in a pagoda to be called the Sandawceti." Having uttered this prophecy the Blessed One departed in the direction of Sīrikhetrā (Prome).

Meanwhile King Candrasuriya, together with queens and his subjects, celebrated festivals in Dhaññavatī, like those of Sudhamma in the Tavatimsa heaven, and without interruption by day or night did homage to the Mahāmuni (*i.e.*, Candasāra) image, which was the representative of the Blessed One. Nine miracles took place in the image-

house : (1) The vasundharā hole dug in its presence could not be filled up with the holy water poured in it by its votaries; (2) when heretics worshipped, its sixfold aureole rays would fade away ; (3) when the faithful approached the image the sixfold rays would flash forth not unlike the flashes of forked lightning ; (4) these rays flashed forth in the evening; (5) birds dared not fly over the image-house; (6) the precincts of the image-house were so spacious that the 101 races of men who thronged to worship the image could never fill it; (7) the tank where the head of the image was washed had the same quantity of water during all seasons of the year; (8) the trees which grew round the image-house had their leaves, twigs, and branches turned towards it; (9) the stone figures placed towards the cardinal points kept away persons who approached the image-house with evil intentions(of plunder, &c.).

Appendix II

H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab of Thailand on his visit to the Mahamuni in 1936**Arakan Temple**

On Monday January 27th, we went to Amarapura to see the Arakan Temple, which house the Maha-muni image. This Buddha image is the palladium of Burma and is believed to have miraculous power. The image has a lengthy history. It is said to have been cast in AD 146 by King Chandra Suriya at Danya-wadi, the capital of then-independent Arakan. The king built a temple for the image on a mountain called Thila-gi-ri. (This name is rendered Sila Khiri in Sanskritised Thai, meaning Stone Peak.) The image is in the Victory over the Demons *mudra*, and it is 2.75 metres across at the lap. (It is about the same size as the Satsada image of Bowon Niwet Monastery in Bangkok). According to popular history, it had miraculous power from the very beginning. While it was being made, the Lord Buddha appeared (in King Chandra Suriya's dreams) and bestowed a blessing on the king, declaring that this image would enhance the Buddhist religion and make it flourish, as though it were a younger brother of the Lord Buddha himself. It is also said that the Mahamuni was cast in three moulds and that the three sections were welded together. Miraculously, the metal surfaces were a perfect and seamless fit. People thought this was a result of the blessing bestowed by the Lord Buddha.

An even stranger version has passed down to us. The Lord Buddha is said to have visited Arakan for the benefit of all creatures (just as he visited Mandalay Hill to make the prophesy and also visited Suwanna Banphot Hill in our country, where he left an impression of his foot). The king of Arakan heard his sermon and become a believer. When the Lord Buddha was about to depart, the king asked to cast an image of him, to which the king could pay reverence in the Lord Buddha's absence. In giving his consent, the Lord Buddha bestowed a blessing on the image, endowing it with the power to preach sermons just like himself. The

powers of the blessing lasted until the Buddhist religion became firmly established, and then they came to an end.

Regardless of the veracity of these accounts concerning its origins, the annals show that the Maha-muni was revered in Arakan as well as in the Burmese and Mon kingdoms. It is said to possess miraculous powers, and it has been the palladium of the land for more than a thousand years. The kings of Burma who had great enough power to attack Arakan (beginning with King Anaw-rahta) all tried to take the Maha-muni away and make it the palladium of their own capitals. In a few instances, they even cracked the image into sections, but later ran into difficulties.

No king was able to carry the Maha-muni image away from Arakan until King Bo-daw-hpaya of the Kon-baung dynasty came to the throne in 1782 (the year Bangkok was founded). He conquered Arakan and, in order to demonstrate that he had greater power than earlier kings, he ordered the Heir Apparent (who was commanding the armies) to bring the Maha-muni to Burma without fail. (It is curious that he was able to bring the image, but did not gain the power that he aspired to. After conquering Arakan, he launched attacks on the Thai kingdom during the reign of King Rama I, but his army was repulsed by the Thai both times). The Maha-muni image was brought from Arakan by cracking it into three sections and taking them by ship down the coast to a port. They were then loaded on timber trolleys and dragged onward, overland to Burma. Items of worship paraphernalia that had been in the Maha-muni Temple, such as very old bronze statuettes, were brought along with the image. Labourers were mobilised to clear the way and drag the sections carefully across the mountains, by way of Taungup Pass and then down to Padaung on the Irrawaddy. There the pieces were loaded onto boats and brought in procession to the capital, where great festivities were held on a grand scale.

For the installation of the Maha-muni, King Bo-daw-hpaya built a new temple which is commonly called the Arakan Temple nowadays. It is on a hill outside Amarapura, towards the east. Originally, a small *mandapa* was built in the temple, and the image was housed in the *mandapa*. A large wooden assembly hall with a spired roof was built over the *mandapa* to cover it. The terrace extending out from the hall was

surrounded at intervals by pavilions and by the enclosing temple walls. Like the other important Buddhist monuments (such as the Shwei Dagon and the Shwei Maw-daw), the Arakan Temple has staircases on all four sides. Ever since King Bo-daw-hpaya's time, the Maha-muni has been the palladium of Burma. Constant streams of Buddhist believers have come to pay reverence to it, both from within Burma and from without. But in 1884, during the reign of King Thi-baw and just prior to the fall of Burma, the Arakan Temple was entirely destroyed by fire. King Thi-baw had another inner *mandapa* built, in which the Maha-muni could be housed as it was originally. But before the spired building and monastic precincts could be built, the kingdom fell in 1885. The Burmese believe that the burning of the Arakan Temple was an omen foreboding the fall of their country.

The Maha-muni is still as greatly revered as it was in the past. The lay people announced a meritorious undertaking and invited the public to help in rebuilding the temple. I think they collected quite a lot of money in donations and were thus able to rebuild it in plaster-covered brick, making it larger and more solid than before. An Italian architect was commissioned to design it. The British government, when asked for permission, agreed that the people could build it in whatever manner they wished. The Arakan Temple is now the oldest of temples, because it houses the oldest Buddha image whereas the structure itself is the newest among the great Buddhist monuments of Burma.

When I visited the Arakan Temple, I could see, as soon as I reached the front of it, that its designer was European. Even though the architect intended it to be Burmese, he did not fully conceal his European temperament, which is evident in the shape of the spired roof of the assembly hall as well as elsewhere. But one cannot say that the work of the European architect is inferior to the original, because he made many architectural improvements. For instance, he used plastered brick to build the assembly hall, thereby making it durable without having to increase its weight. Even the staircases, with shopkeepers' stalls along both sides, are considerably neater and better illuminated than those along the way into the Shwei Dagon. Improvements were made in the assembly hall, judging from its design, by dispensing with the small *mandapa* that was

previously in the interior. Instead, the hall itself was designed as a large *mandapa* with a spired roof.

In the centre of this *mandapa* the Maha-muni is installed on a pediment more than 1.5 metres high which is shaped like a royal dais. Bright light comes in through both the front door and the windows at both side of the hall, so that the image can be seen clearly. The spire and its moulded designs are covered with lacquer, gilding and glass mosaic. At a distance the spire looks reddish with gold inlay. Further down, only the interior walls of the room housing the image are decorated with glass mosaic and gilding. The exterior walls are merely covered with white plaster, although the false archway at the rear has moulded decorations. Four porticoes, one on each side of the building, extend out from the veranda all the way to the staircase and serve as resting places for lay people. The surrounding courtyard is paved with tiles, all the way out to the temple walls, and contains many rest pavilions.

There is one curious thing that I did not observe myself; but I found a description of it in a book on Burma after I departed. The moulded decorations for the Maha-muni (such as those in the false archway) were made by nailing wood carvings tightly to the walls and then covering the carvings with plaster so that they would look like stucco mouldings. Thinking it over, this must be true, since Burmese artisans are more skilled at wood carving than at making moulded decoration. When they were building the assembly hall, and unable to find anyone skilled in moulded decoration, they must have used wood carvings instead and then transformed them into mouldings, as stated.

I had wanted to see the Maha-muni image for a long time, because it is rumoured to be beautiful to behold and is the most important Buddha image in Burma. It is said that even the Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VIII) consented to remove his footwear to go inside to look at it when he was visiting Burma. Whether this is true or not, I do not know. When I arrived, as soon as I had paid reverence, presented my votive offerings and sat down to study the image, I was puzzled to see that the face alone is of polished bronze. The rest of it is overlaid with plaster (or something) and covered with gold leaf. The entire image is lumpy and patchy all over – like what we would call 'chicken skin'. This looked

amazing because Buddha images in Burma, if cast of bronze, ordinarily are polished all over, except for the coiffure. If made of stone, they are likewise polished all over. If made of stucco the smaller ones are covered with gold leaf and the larger ones are painted. But nowhere else can an image be found whose face alone is polished as is the Maha-muni's. According to an account written by an English diplomat, who visited Burma when the capital was still at Amarapura and who went to see the Maha-muni there, the face alone was polished in his time, too.

Since my curiosity was aroused, I made a further examination and became even more puzzled as I considered its shape. For example, the lower arms seem to have been reshaped in many places. Approaching close up to examine them and taking a look at the right hand, I almost cried out 'What?' It appears deformed and has crooked fingers quite different from the usual hands of a Buddha image. Not trusting my own eyes, I called the princesses over to have a look also; but they saw the same thing. I thus surmised that the Maha-muni image has long been in poor condition. When it was restored, stucco had to be used to replace the original bronze, which had broken off and disappeared from many places. Hence it's present condition.

After consulting the annals, I was able to figure out the reasons why the image is in such poor condition. It was cracked into sections in order to move it from one country to another. This implies that the original owners, after regaining control of Arakan, probably put it back together, although rejoining such large objects is not simple. The fragmenting of the Maha-muni probably began while it was still in Arakan, where it had to be rejoined and repaired. To conceal the damage, the owners had to cover it up in the same way that the Burmese do today. When King Bo-daw-hpaya gave orders to bring it to Burma, he probably did not know how fragmented it was. The image must have been bumped about and shaken up when it was cracked into three sections, loaded onto a ship, then off-loaded onto timber trolleys and dragged across the mountains into Burma. It got in even worse condition during this removal. When it was reinstalled, the damage had to be plastered over, and the entire image was then lacquered and gilded. But fearing that people would doubt whether it was really the Maha-muni, the face alone

was left exposed and polished, making it obvious that the image is a bronze one.

One event known with certainty is the fire that destroyed the Arakan temple in 1884. The gold leaf affixed to the image melted and ran down. The fact that 10.5 kilogrammes of gold was later gathered up implies that the image itself must have melted somewhat in the fire. Later, when it was put back in place, it had to be greatly restored. The hand is misshapen probably because it was burnt - although not to the extent of melting away. Hence it was put back together in the shape in which it was burnt. While I was sitting in the assembly hall, I saw a constant stream of people coming in, to pay reverence and affix gold leaf to the Maha-muni. Some even asked me to affix gold leaf to it. But I did not respond, because my desire was to scrape the gold off and to see how much is left of the original Maha-muni, rather than to cover the image even more thickly with gold!

The Arakan Temple houses two other things that I should describe. First are the stone inscriptions of King Bo-daw-hpaya concerning monastic lands. (Such lands are called *wut-tagan* in Burmese, which seems to be a corruption of the Pali word *bhutagama*, meaning 'vegetation'.) According to the historical traditions recorded in these inscriptions, whenever a king built a monastery in the past, he would assign labourers to serve the monastery and would endow it with a parcel of monastic land. The state revenues collected from this land were devoted to support the monastery. To attest to this grant, the king would have a royal decree inscribed in stone and set up in the monastery. (This was formerly the custom in the Thai kingdom, too.) As time passed, more and more monasteries came into existence over a long period; the revenues for government expenditures decreased, because expenditures based on the monastic land grants were constantly rising. This loss of revenue became a serious problem during the reign of King Bo-daw-hpaya (r. 1782-1819), and the king decided to reform the system. He revoked all the original monastic land inscriptions, promulgated a new law and inscribed a new set of stones. Only certain monasteries were selected for royal grants of monastic lands, and they were provided only with adequate funds. The new set of inscriptions was kept in the Arakan

Temple. The Archaeological Survey has just discovered the original stone inscriptions, which had been discarded in heaps at another monastery elsewhere. They are planning to collate them for use in further archaeological research, which may prove rather beneficial.

The second of the most interesting objects at the Arakan Temple are the very old bronze statuettes: two standing figures of Siva about 1.5 metres tall, a figure of the three-headed elephant about 1 metre tall and three figures of lions. (The original heads of the lions disappeared. Burmese artisans made new heads for them, but not knowing what the heads of Khmer lions looked like, transformed them into Burmese-lion heads). Altogether there are six statuettes, kept on an altar out in the open next to the wall inside the temple precincts. The Burmese generally know only that these statuettes were brought from Arakan together with the Maha-muni image. Actually, they have a historic connexion with the Thai kingdom, too. Historians in Burma know merely that they were brought originally from Ayuttaya by King Bayin-naung. No one knows anything about them prior to that time. I had resolved to see them during my trip and had searched for historical evidence ahead of time. As soon as I took a look at them I was certain that my suppositions are correct. All the features of the statuettes are Khmer, and I am thus confident that their history is as follows.

These statuettes were originally cast in Cambodia by the Khmer. When King Baromma Rachathirat II of Ayutthaya conquered Angkor in 1431, he carried off the statuettes to Ayutthaya, where they remained for almost 138 years.¹ This information is recorded in our annals. In 1569, King Bayin-naung conquered Ayutthaya and carried the statuettes off to Pegu. They remained for about thirty years in the Mon Kingdom. In 1599, King Naresuan attacked Pegu. Initially, the rulers of Toungoo and Arakan agreed to join King Naresuan, but then changed their minds and conspired together. The Toungoo ruler escaped with King Nanda-bayin of Pegu to

¹ These statuettes were presumably cast in the reign of King Jayavarman VII in the early 13th century A.D. The two figures of Siva are in reality *dvarapala* (door-guardians). All the statuettes are now preserved in a pavilion in the precinct of the Arakan Temple.

Toungoo, and the Arakanese burnt Pegu before the Thai king arrived. The latter, getting only the deserted city, was offended and followed in pursuit, laying siege to Toungoo. But his food supplies were exhausted and he had to depart. After the Thai army left, the Arakanese gathered up these bronze and took them to Arakan, setting them up as Buddhist votive objects in the Maha-muni Temple. These statuettes remained in Arakan for more than 180 years. In 1785, King Bo-daw-hpaya conquered Arakan. When the Maha-muni was brought to Amarapura, the bronzes were brought along and set up as Buddhist votive objects for the Maha-muni as before. The Khmer bronze statuettes have remained in Burma ever since.

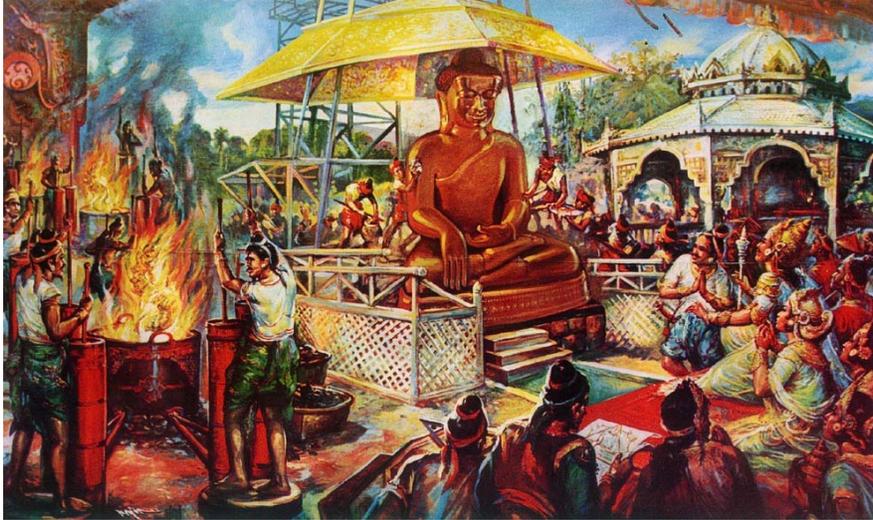
The Burmese annals say that King Bayin-naung brought thirty bronze statuettes from the Thai Kingdom. In the course of being moved many times, they probably became broken, until nearly all of them disappeared. After the Arakan Temple was destroyed by fire, only six were left. The three-headed elephant is the only one in good condition. All the others are in poor or bad condition.

From Damrong, Rajanubhab, Prince of Thailand. *Journey through Burma in 1936*, a view of the culture, history and institutions; [translated by Dr. Kennon Breazeale]. Bangkok: River Books, 1991. p. 112-116.

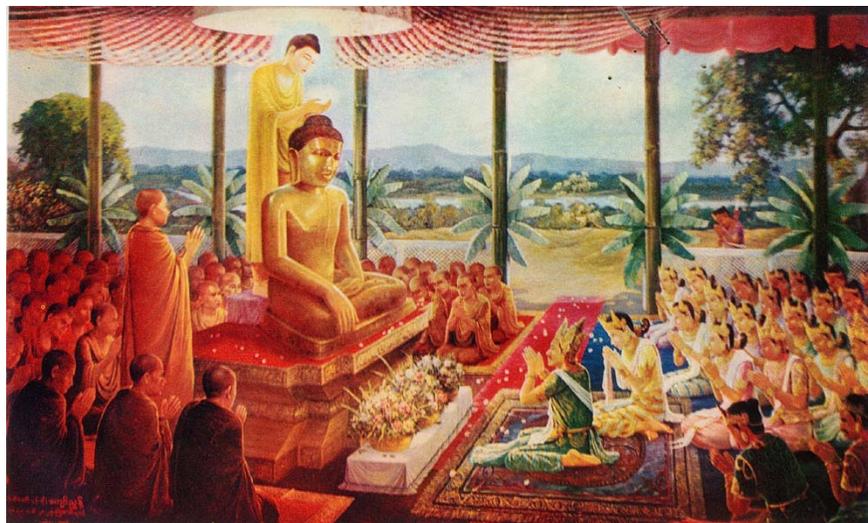
Ref: Cultural Classics. Yangon: Seameo Regional Centre for History and Tradition, 2001.



The Mahamuni



The Casting of the Image



The Buddha breathes life into the Image



King Alaungsithu of Bagan comes to pay homage



*The Crown Prince, (the Prince of Shwe Daung)
on his March to Rakhine*



Mahamuni arrives at Padaung on the Ayeyawady River

(Note: Five paintings of the Mahamuni story, reproduced from U Maung Maung Tin (M.A.). *Mandalay Mahamuni yoke-shin-daw paya-gyi thamaing*. Mandalay: Mahamuni Pagoda Trustees, 1996. These and several more of the colourful modern paintings can be viewed in the Mahamuni Pagoda compound in Mandalay.)