

# 1 Introduction

On 15 August 2000 the Oslo-based Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) reported the dismissal of Pe Than, the Myanmar Deputy Minister for Transport, together with some engineers from the ministry. The reason: a massive statue of the Buddha, carved from a huge block of marble found some 40km north of Mandalay, had not arrived in time on 24 July to be conveyed to a barge that was to transport the still-unfinished sculpture via the Ayeyarwady to a site in Yangon. A big ceremony had been organised for the auspicious event, attended by General Khin Nyunt, Secretary-1 of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The event was to be broadcast live nationwide. According to DVB, the live broadcast was called off when the image did not arrive as scheduled at 8am.

The alleged sacking – the DVB news proved to be a rumour broadcast by the exile media based in Oslo – is a small episode in the saga that started shortly after a Mandalay craftsman specialised in religious sculptures found a huge block of marble in the Sagyin Hills near the last capital of royal Burma in 1998. The focus of the drama was the “Loka Chantha Abhaya Labhamuni Buddha Image”, as it was typically referred to in the English version of the state newspapers, which can now be seen on Mindhamma Hill in Insein, as the main attraction of the Kyauk-taw-gyi (Great Stone)



Aerial view of the Kyau-taw-gyi  
Pagoda in Insein (scan)

Pagoda. The organiser of the construction of the pagoda around the Buddha image was Khin Nyunt, who worked on behalf of junta chairman Senior General Than Shwe. A great number of people from Myanmar's Buddhist population – both monks and laypeople – participated in the process of building the pagoda. Until today, the great image attracts many devotees as well as tourists.

The story from the discovery of the huge piece of marble to the consecration of the image in February 2002 under the guidance of the SPDC leadership is inscribed on a "Commemorative Stone" situated on the pagoda platform. The story of the pagoda was told in a rather dry bureaucratic language that starts and ends with well-known Buddhist formulas, is illustrated by four paintings, two each above the two staircases leading to the sculpture.



Northern stairway



Southern stairway

The four pictures tell the same story as the inscription. Under the protection of the Buddha, whose white sculpture dominates, the paintings depict interactions between the sons of Buddha, the mem-

bers of the Sangha (the order of Buddhist monks), the people and the government, represented by the acting military rulers, who act as supervisors of the whole enterprise. Furthermore, at the foot of Mindhamma Hill three of the six white elephants are kept that were found in Myanmar during the time of direct military rule after 1988. The three others are now in Naypyidaw, the new capital that replaced Yangon in late 2005. The significance of white elephants in Theravada Buddhist countries as good omens for the ruler and the ruled alike has even be used by politicians like the Thai political reformer Pridi Bhanomyong to explain good governance (Zöllner 2921). Mindhamma Hill is surrounded by a particular aura of significance based on a combination of religion, statecraft and history.



The Elephant House  
(2003)



Two white elephants  
before the shelter  
was built

This aura and the details assembled here distinguish the pagoda of the great marble Buddha on the Hill of the Royal Dhamma – the literal meaning of *mindhamma* – from other pagodas built under the supervision of the SPDC. The verbal and visual narrations of the process of construction are more telling, setting it apart from the many “political pagodas” built after Burma became independent in 1948 that continue the long tradition of the Buddhist rulers, whether Burmese, Arakanese, Mon or Shan.

To name just a few: Burma’s first Prime Minister Nu initiated the building of the Kaba Aye Pagoda and the adjacent cave in connection with the Sixth Buddhist Synod held between 1954 and 1956. Ne Win, the country’s undisputed leader from 1962 to 1988, not known for his Buddhist inclinations, oversaw the building of the Maha Wizaya Pagoda erected close to the Shwedagon Pagoda, the country’s most sacred monument, to commemorate the adoption of a new Sangha Act by the leaders of the Buddhist order in 1980.

In 1996, the Swe-daw-myat Pagoda, hosting a replica of one of the teeth of the Buddha, was finished. The relic was copied from the “original” that resides in Beijing and is sent from time to time to Myanmar and other Buddhist countries as a means of religious diplomacy on the part of the Chinese government.<sup>2</sup> The shape of the pagoda is borrowed from the famous Ananda Pagoda in Bagan. The new shrine was nicknamed “Than Shwe’s staircase to heaven”, referring to the then chairman of the military junta between 1992 and 2011.

Another new pagoda is the replica of the Shwedagon Pagoda, constructed in Naypyidaw to connect the fame of the country’s most sacred pagoda with the new capital. It has the same shape, but is just one foot shorter than the model in Yangon.

The following pages highlight some stages of the construction process of the Kyauk-taw-gyi Pagoda and the massive Buddha within it and its verbal and pictorial representation.. It is a case

<sup>2</sup> The last visit of the tooth to Myanmar took place in November 2011 and drew huge crowds of people in Naypyidaw, Yangon and Mandalay, where the tooth was exhibited. For details see Zöllner 2006.

study of the interrelation of the secular authorities, Buddhist religion, the Buddhist Sangha and the people living in the context of military authoritarian rule.

Above all, however, the following pages intend to tell and illustrate a very colourful story. It connects the times of the Burmese kings with the sad developments after the military coup of 1 February 2021 as the last chapter of this book will show. Religious state affairs connected to Buddha statues made from marble occur until today.



The Kyauk-taw-gyi  
Pagoda on Min-  
dhamma Rd.  
in Yangon