

## Climbing Mandalay Hill

Mandalay Hill is sacred to all Buddhists because when Gautama Buddha visited the 790 feet (240 m) peak with his disciple Ananda, he proclaimed that on the 2400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, a metropolis devoted to Buddhist study would be founded on the plane below the hill. Thus, when King Mindon decided to move the capital of Burma from Amarapura in 1857, the people of what is now called Myanmar were not surprised; the great master had said this would happen. The political center of the new city formed a ring and the city was named Mandalay after *mandala*, the Sanskrit word for circle. It was the capital for only twenty five years until the British invaded Burma, but maintained its status as a major cultural and religious center of Buddhism.

Our friend Ba-Maw recommended visiting the sacred hill in late afternoon to avoid the main rush of tourists, climb the stairs when the daytime heat had cooled, and catch the view of the sunset from the hilltop temple. The two giant guardian *chinthas*, half lion and half dragon, greeted us at the southern entrance as we prepared to climb the 1729 steps to the top. The other side of the hill offered elevators and escalators, but we wanted the long life promised to pilgrims who climb the steps and pay homage to the different shrines built along the upward route.

The worn steps felt cool under my bare feet as I started the climb, a nice contrast to the heat still lingering, despite dusk approaching. The sheer number of stairs was at first intimidating, but after a short period of climbing, I landed on a level plane filled with stands offering food, drink, and artwork for sale. Several vendors also offered the chance of stepping on a bathroom scale for a small fee. Not having weighed myself for a couple of months, I chose the scale with the longest line. In my mind, the most popular instrument must also be the most accurate. The reading was at

least 20 lbs less than what could possibly be my true weight, proving why this particular scale was so popular; people all over the world prefer to live in denial about how much gravity actually pulls on their bodies. Strangely feeling lighter, although I knew it not to be true, I skipped towards the continuing steps.

Right when we were about to resume our ascent to the top, a young monk approached us.

“Please sir; can you help me practice my English?” he asked Mike.

We’d heard this particular question before. Usually a request for money appeared after the practicing session was over. We exchanged uneasy glances, I shrugged my shoulders. You can’t really turn down the request of a holy man; that must wreak havoc with your Karma. Mike mumbled something non-committal to the monk and we continued up the stairs with him in tow. Expecting the monk to initiate the practice session, I finally spoke after ascending several flights of stairs, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

“What is your name?” I asked our saffron robed companion.

“Pannasipa is my monk name, ma’am.”

“I am Asa and that is Mike.” I pointed to my husband. “What was your name before you became a monk?”

“That name is no longer mine.” He stated this politely, but firmly, ending any further inquiries.

I was delighted that he answered me at all. The Buddhist monks in the countries we had visited previous to Myanmar -- Sri Lanka, Thailand and Laos -- were not comfortable speaking to women. In Laos, they wouldn’t even touch anything that I was holding. When paying entrance fees to temples that required it, I had to lay the money on the table before they would reach for it and they never looked me in the eye. It was a little uncomfortable at first, made me feel like a non-entity. I got used to it mostly because most of the monks we met were young boys. Their

uneasiness was not that much different from any other shy adolescent dealing with strangers, but it left my many questions about their lives unanswered. Pannasipa's joining us provided me the chance to find out all about what it was like to devote your life to religion; the possibility made me giddy. *I must however show reverence and respect at all cost, I told myself. Do not appear too nosy.*

"How long have you been a monk?" I thought this was a safe place to start my interrogation.

"Since I was thirteen, ma'am."

"How old are you now?"

"Twenty-five years old, ma'am."

I stopped and stared at him. He did not look to be any older than eighteen. Pannasipa met my shocked look with amused calmness; eyes sparkled behind his wire rimmed glasses, a half smile adorned his lips. Mike stopped to look at us looking at each other, shrugged his shoulders and continued taking pictures of various points of interest. I was too wrapped up in the conversation with my very own personal spiritual guru to notice the surroundings or the other people on the path.

"When did you get your calling to the religious life?"

"Calling? On the phone?" A blank look was on his face.

"No, no. I mean, when did you know you wanted to become a monk?"

"When my parents told me I would become one."

"Oh." A thousand questions sped through my head, but I didn't know how to ask any of them without intruding. We walked in silence for a while. Mike with camera clicking, preceding us up the stairs.

"I am middle child with two brothers and two sisters. It is tradition for me to be monk," he volunteered.

I thought this not so different from old western traditions: the oldest son inherited the farm while younger sons had the option of becoming soldiers or priests to make a living. I took his answer as a sign that it was okay to continue with my questions.

“Is your family from Mandalay?”

“No ma’am. They live in country side, one hour bus ride from city.”

“Do you visit them often?”

“No, bus ticket cost much money. My parents have farm, food to eat, but no money.”

“Why do you want to practice English?” I quickly switched to a topic not about money.

“So I can teach young monks English.”

I wanted to know why the young monks needed to know English, as well as so much more about his life as a monk. *What did he study? What did he know? Could he teach me?*

Before I had a chance to ask any of this, Pannasipa pointed out that we had reached the famous half way temple of the hill. In the Shweyattaw Temple, a large golden standing statue of the Buddha pointed dramatically toward the Royal Palace, the faithful disciple Annanda praying attentively at his side. The larger-than-life statues were commissioned by King Mindon, and the gold on the Buddha represented the radiance of spiritual energy and universal power, explained Pannasipa. Several devotees were kneeling or sitting in front of the statue. They weren’t exactly praying, but seemed to enjoy some sort of spiritual rest. I joined them while our religious friend chatted with some locals. Mike interrupted his picture-taking to sit next to me.

“We should move a little quicker so we get to the top before sunset.” Mike suggested.

I agreed and looked around for my spiritual adviser. He was nowhere to be found, we continued up the steps on our own. Mike set the pace and soon, I was breathing hard, trying to keep up with his longer legs. Light steps behind us announced Pannasipa’s arrival, his robe

barely moving, despite the hurried stride. Apparently, life in the monastery kept you in tip-top shape. Racing up the stairs left no room for any more questions.

We reached the summit with the sun low in the sky, its rays showing off the brilliance of the temple on top. Marble floors and pillars in lustrous colors and gilded roofs shone and glittered in the picture-perfect light. The contrast from the grey light of the covered staircase was startling. Not only was the light different, obviously this place received a daily scrubbing. Its pristine condition brought into contrast the grubbiness of the stairs. I guessed the difference of cleanness was because tourists took the escalators and elevators to the top while locals climbed the stairs. Slowly, I spun around in a three-sixty, soaking up the amazing view. The countryside surrounding Mandalay was littered with pagodas. As the sun sunk in the sky, their golden roofs twinkled like stars, their constellations stretching from the hill all the way to the horizon. My breath caught at the sight of such beauty; I wondered if the Buddha saw this in his mind when he first stood on top of the same hill and made his prophecy.

“Can you believe they made us take our shoes off?” A loud angry voice broke my spiritual reverie. A group in unisex uniforms of khaki shorts and Hawaiian shirts exited the elevator. “There is no telling what kind of infections and fungus we’ll pick up in a place like this. Watch your steps, don’t step on anything funky.”

Mortified at the rudeness of fellow Westerners, I turned to see Pannasipa watching the group. Their sock-clad feet stomped right past him, one of the men brushing up against him, almost pushing him out of the way. He caught my look, smiled and shrugged his shoulders as if to say: “What can you do?” I smiled back and the embarrassing moment was over. Our robed friend turned to Mike.

“Are you from England, sir?”

“I am.”

“Where in England are you from, sir?”

“A town called Preston, in the north.”

“Ah, yes. They have a football team. A secondary team I believe?”

“You’re right!” Mike shot me a look of disbelief. *A Myanmar monk knowing the team names of the English lower leagues?! What are the odds of that?*

“What’s your favorite team?” Mike asked, eager to participate in the conversation now that he recognized a fellow “footie” fan.

“Manchester United and maybe Liverpool.”

The talk quickly turned to favorite players and memorable matches. We learned that when he wasn’t teaching English to the young disciples in the monastery, Pannasipa coached them in soccer. I smiled as visions of ball playing monks, saffron robes flapping as they ran barefoot across the field filled my mind. No wonder our companion had managed to keep a hurried pace up the stairs without breaking a sweat.

With the sun set, it was time to return to Ba-Maw and the waiting rickshaw. As we descended, I asked one final question:

“Pannasipa, will we live a long life now that we have climbed the stairs all the way to the top of Mandalay Hill?”

Was it the leftover light from the setting sun that caused the twinkle in his eyes? It was hard to tell what went on behind those glasses, but the Mona Lisa smile was back on his lips as he delivered my very own spiritual prophecy:

“May you live ten years for every goal that David Beckham scores in a championship game.”