

THE TRADITION OF SAND PAGODAS IN MYANMAR



A sand pagodas located in Sangyaung Township in Yangon

When the monsoon recedes and with the onset of the dry season, sand banks and sand dunes appear in rivers, signaling the start of the traditional Myanmar festival of Sand Pagodas. The building of the temporary pagodas is completed in just one day, but speed notwithstanding, the occasion is a solemn one, complete with offerings of food, lights and flowers, for the status of the

Sand Pagodas is nothing less than of the Valuka Ceti (Symbolic Pagodas). Among the twelve monthly festivals in Myanmar, the building of the Sand Pagoda and its festival falls in the last month of the Myanmar calendar, Tabaung, .Sand Pagodas derive their name from the fact that they were originally built with clean white sand on the sand banks of rivers.

While the ancient tradition of building Sand Pagodas with sand alone and nothing else is still being kept alive in some areas, but some how instead in most places, brick and mortar pagodas have been built around the original traditional Sand Paogdas, and yearly festivals held around them. Worshipping at any of pagodas is believed to be no less beneficial than worshipping a living Buddha. Since a sand pagoda has been built in dedication to the benefices and infinite virtue of the Lord Buddha, it is included in the Uddisssa Ceti category.

The purpose of building Sand Pagodas and the tradition underlying its worship focus on paying homage to the infinite number of Buddhas that are believed to have achieved Enlightenment in the infinite universe.

As the number of Buddhas is infinite, it easily exceeds the number of grains of sand in all the banks of the River Ganges, so there is a traditional way of referring to the Buddhas as “Buddhas, whose number exceeds that of the grains of sand in the river Ganges”. The linguistic connection of grains of sand and Buddhas may have led to the building of Sand Pagodas in commemoration of the Buddhas that have achieved Enlightenment.

Numerous oral traditions can be quoted that set forth the goals of building Sand Pagodas as freedom from disease, peace and tranquility in the community, and freedom from the 5 categories of enemies. In olden days, people in the rural areas had the practice of building a Sand Pagoda first before clearing the land for a new village, believing that a Sand Pagoda at fore ground of the village warded off all dangers and diseases and natural disaster. When silt beds appear in the rivers, farmers built Sand Pagodas before starting any cultivation to ensure an abundant harvest.

Another common purpose for which a Sand Pagoda may be build in the rural areas is to prevent from the three kinds of Catastrophes, namely famine, disease epidemics and disastrous warfare. Thus in World War II, the practice of building Sand Pagodas was widespread in Myanmar as people did everything they could to keep clear of the forth coming dangers of war spreading to their region. Another common custom that continued to date is the building of Sand Pagodas as Yataya in order to bring relief to elderly people in ill health.

Thus behind the old tradition of building Sand Pagodas were numerous beliefs and convictions. The site for a Sand Pagoda is usually located on sand banks in the rivers and creeks that appear during the transition timebetween the rainy season and the dry cool season and at the time when water levels receded. The height ranges from 3 feet to 9 feet. The Sand Pagoda festival falls in the month of Tabaung under the zodiac sign of Pisces.