

The legend of the foundation of the Shwedagon



According to legend, the Shwedagon was founded during the lifetime of the historical Buddha, Gautama, in the 6th century BC. The king of what is now Myanmar, **King Okkalapa** (right) knew that the time had come for a new Buddha to become enlightened. Indeed the belief in previous “Buddhas” (literally “enlightened beings”) is part and parcel of Burmese Buddhism (see page 13).



King Okkalapa was the son of the King of *nats*, **King Sakka** (above left) and Mai Lamu, which is why he had special powers. Already we can see that the story incorporates elements such as *nats*, supernatural spirits which have nothing to do with Buddhism as such.

The statues of King Okkalapa and King Sakka are quite high up on the platform surrounding the main stupa. They are not easy to spot as they are surrounded by a large number of spires and golden decorations, but they do have a sign in English giving their name. King Sakka stands between the Saturday corner and the Western stairway. King Okkalapa stands between the Western stairway and the Rahu (Wednesday after 6 p.m.) corner. (See section on planetary posts)

Two brothers, **Thapussa and Bahalika**, who were both merchants, travelled to Northern India where they met Gautama Buddha who had attained enlightenment. They presented him with food, some say honey, and became the first lay disciples of the Buddha. The Buddha then gave them eight of his hairs to take back to Myanmar.

The statues below are relatively recent, I think, as I have not seen them mentioned in any books or on any maps. They are near the back wall, between the Saturday corner and the Southern stairway.





The two brothers returned to Myanmar, where they found King Okkalapa and gave him the sacred relics. The King wished to build a stupa to house the relics, together with some other relics from the previous three Buddhas, i.e. the staff of Kakusandha, the water-filter of Konagamana and a piece of the robe of Kassapa.

However, neither the king nor anyone else could remember where the relics were kept. Help came from a *nat*, the Sule *nat*, who was very old and had witnessed the burial of these relics. He revealed where they were kept so that the King was able to build a shrine on Singuttara Hill, the present location of the Shwedagon.

The Sule nat (right) is located along the back wall between the Tuesday corner and the Eastern stairway. It is interesting to note that the story concerning the foundation of the Sule pagoda is virtually the same. The Shwemawdaw pagoda in Bago, also boasts some hair relics given to the two brothers. One version of the story says that some of the hairs were stolen from the brothers, which might explain the profusion of relics.



The precious hairs were washed in a special well, which is connected to the Ayeyarwady above which a pavilion has been erected (*left*). They were then enshrined with the other relics in the stupa (*right*) known as Naung Daw Gyi pagoda, or elder brother pagoda, to commemorate the elder brother, Thapussa, before their transfer (?) to the main stupa.



The hair washing well is situated near the Northern devotional hall (see section on past Buddhas). The elder brother stupa is situated in the north-eastern corner of the platform. It now stands at a height of 46 meters but has been renovated extensively. Only men can enter the shrine.