

THE

GOLDEN

SHWEDALGON

B-329



THE GOLDEN SHWEDAGON

by

Ma Tin Yee

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FORE WORD

Since young I have heard about "SHWEDAGON" and have an unsurpassed obsession to visit it and upon countless occasions I've climbed up its stairs; I've walked in wonder and delight upon its platform. I've prayed together with the men, women and children and have looked with awe upon the great drama of worship as it unfolds itself before my eyes. I've walked in the freshness of the dawn and have spent the hot noontide in one of the pavilions and have followed the glory of the setting sun as it throws its magic on this splendid shrine. I've walked silently in the night and have heard the music of the tinkling bells far overhead in the passing breeze. In short I've gone to it at all times of joy and sorrow and almost in every mood, and like any Burman I've come to know it and love it, yet when I come to describe it, its fascination, its beauty the life that moves upon it, the emotion it embodies, I realise that I am undertaking a task that is beyond my power of performance

There is no centre in Burma that can be compared for the display of colour, for the physical pageantry and the spiritual expression of life. The Shwedagon with its spire of gold, touched by the flaming sun, is the very first object upon which the eyes of the world traveller rest as he approaches Rangoon and is also the last of the city he looks upon when he says adieu to Rangoon. The memory of it will be hard to fade from the eyes of one who had once looked at it.

No doubt, it is the greatest shrine of the Buddhist faith and have equal if not surpassed the greatest shrines of the earth. This is the great fact which takes some time to find out. Once it is realised the mighty fabric falls into its true perspective; it is no longer a mass of dead brick work, but the great shaft of the temple of which the blue sky and the star at night are the vaulted roof. Let a tourist when he goes back remember this and he will find delight, his admiration, his understanding of the great fame much enhanced.

Tin Yee

Ma Tin Yee

PREFACE

Many books both in Burmese as well as in English have been written about the "Shwedagon Pagoda", but this is the first attempt to narrate about it in verse with poetic romance.

The first verse tells us about the significance the Pagoda has for all the Burmese Buddhist who for generations have regarded it as the most reverent symbol reminding all the people of Buddha's sacred teachings.

The second and third verses describe it as a huge and beautiful landmark dominating the skyline of Rangoon. In the next verse we find the quotes of expressing of wonder and amazement made by eminent foreign visitors while the following verse gives an account of the part it played in the freedom movement against the British.

The sixth and seventh verse are the narrations about the traditional festivals held on the Pagoda at regular intervals revealing the cheerful and generous character of the Burmese people.

Then there follows the history of Pagoda's origin and the natural catastrophes and the desecration it has undergone through the ages and how its glory had been restored by the devotees.

Then the final verses give the detailed description of the Pagoda's magnificent structure from the engineering point of view and close with the divine influence it will go on to have on all comers.

Maung Kyaing
Managing Trustee
Shwedagon Pagoda Board of Trustees

First Edition

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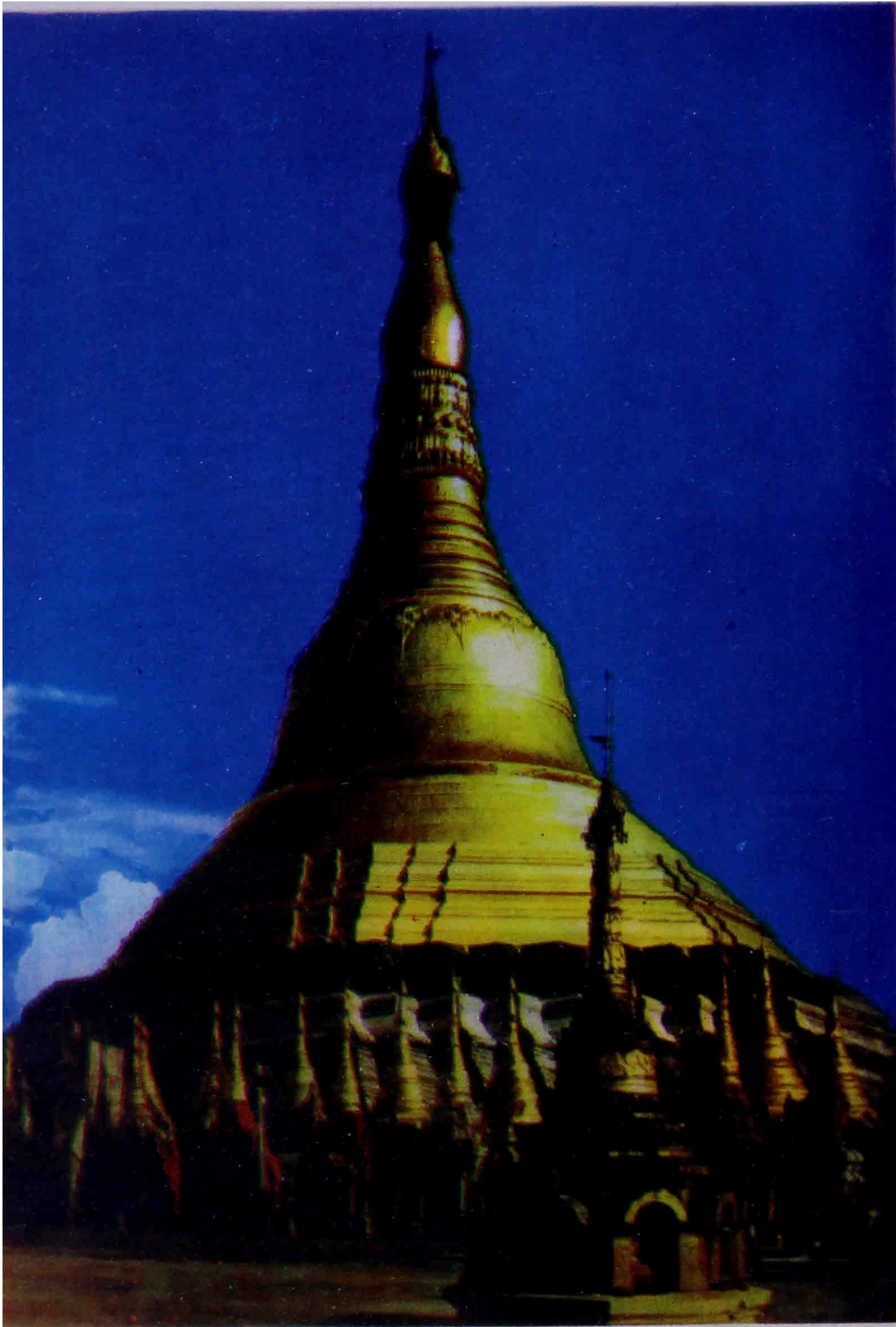
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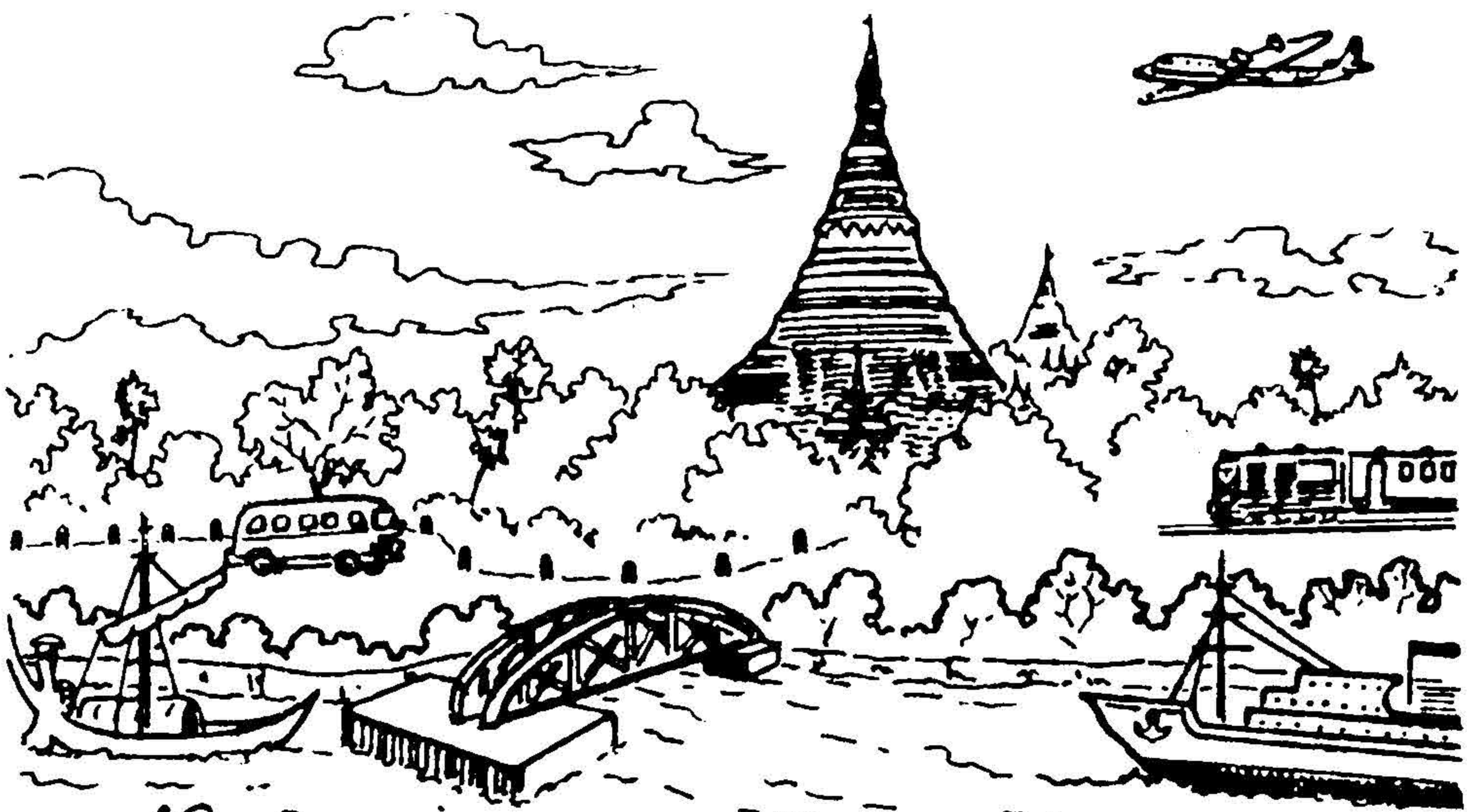
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DEDICATED TO -

U Tin Maung Htwe
(Nat _ Ye _ Kan)



Shwedagon Pagoda in the land of Burma,
Is an important seat of man's culture;
Sacred to the peoples of all creeds and climes,
Existing at all tides and times;
To the Burmese Shwedagon means multifarious thing,
A symbol of loving kindness for all beings;
'Tis the main religious edifice
Enshrines Buddha's hair relics;
In weal and woe 'tis a source of strength,
Inspiring the people to greater attainment,
The pulsating heart of inspiration and devotion,
Prevailing in their ways and action,
In time of trouble they come for refuge
To lessen the suffering that's acute;
It's embodiment of political, social and cultural unity
That gives the people pride and dignity,
So come and view the Shwedagon Pagoda in its splendour
A physical manifestation of spiritual grandeur.



Come' to Rangoon in any way ,
By land, sea or what you may ;
Be in a country boat running in with tide,
But you'll witness the mighty sight;
Coming from Europe or Pacific up the Hlaing river,
One is sure to gape at it with awe and wonder ;
Or come one may from the district by bus or train ,
Shwedagon is still the main;
In Jet plane over airport Mingaladon,
You'll behold the jewelled vane of Shwedagon,
Greeting travellers as they come,
A landmark of the greatest one .

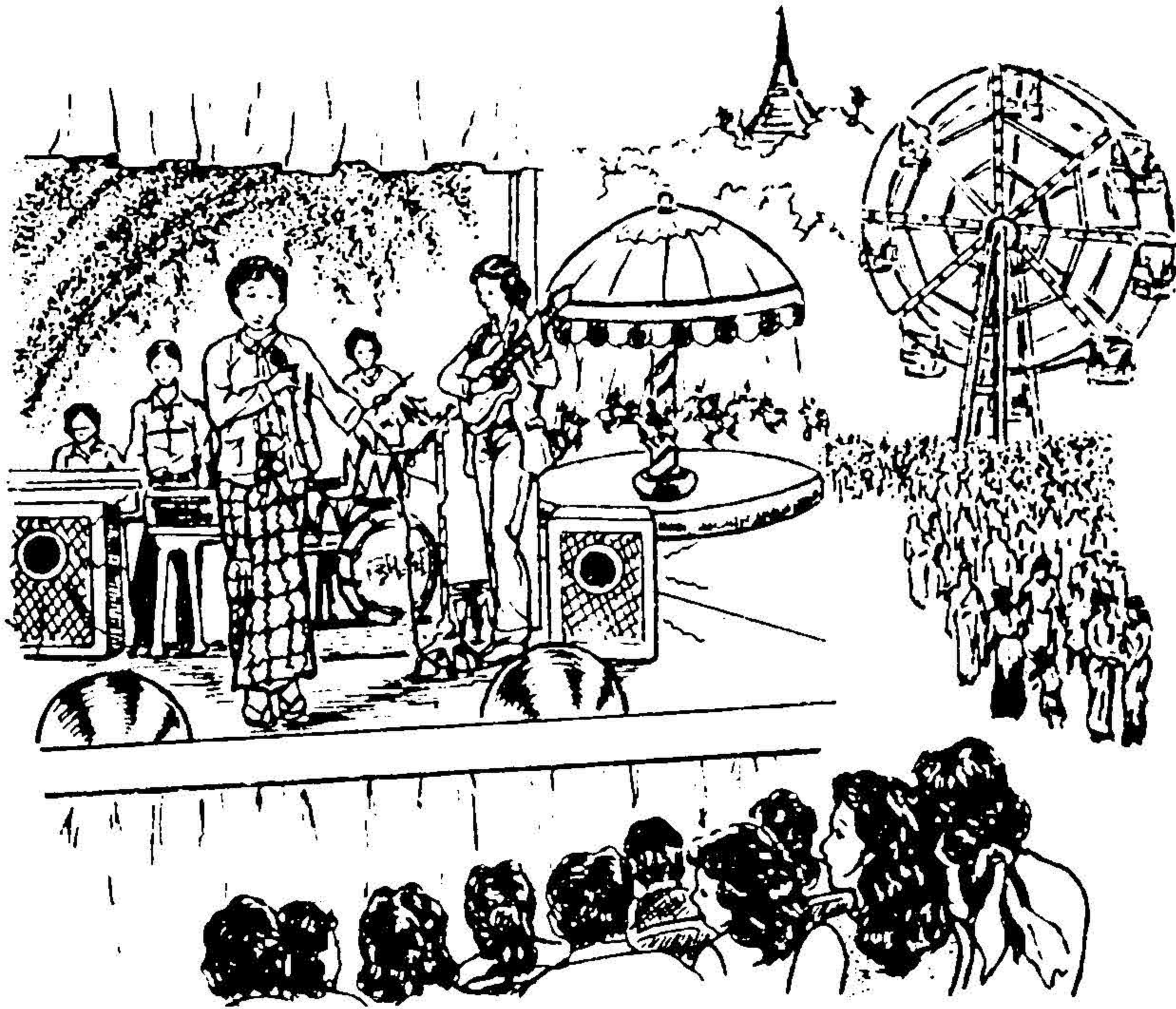
Topping the landscape, Shwedagon's so grand and fair,
The spire pointing up at the sky, it's almost there ;
It dominates the city majestically,
And rule the people spiritually ;
View it from a busy street ,
A glorious posture it will greet
Rising in a sphere of massive bold,
From top to bottom it's gilded gold ;
A glittering enchanting golden bloom ,
It inspires and charms like the crystal moon ;
Amidst panorama of Rangoon towering
Looked from a distance 'tis a golden flowering .





Many a visitor says from the start
That they adore it with all their heart,
Some describe it as *The Golden Splendour*
For Kipling it's *Waking Winking Wonder*
President Nixon said *The greatest monument ever erected*
by man.
Justice Douglas (U.S) added as *The loveliest place of the*
land,
Sir Arnold term it as *The Pyramid of fire*.
And all agreed that its *A greatest Sire* ;
Some say that this is *The fairest place*
With all the wonders and ample grace ;
The Golden Princess say a few,
They'll go on extolling in a way new ;
Describe it in your own fitting way,
Nobody will say it nay ;
But words cannot reveal,
For a Burman, the Pagoda's appeal.

In history it occupies a hallowed place ,
But the British made it a military base ;
Soon the people rose indignation
Demanding an end to British occupation ;
For the Colonialists tread upon
This holy place with their boots on ;
Vigorously the Burmese protested ,
And flaming agitation was widely started ;
The university students went on strike
And gathered a storm of earth shaking might ,
Gradually the British came to repent ,
And finally they were made to relent ;
In 1946 the Shwedagon Nyilagan²² was convened ,
Attended by students, peasants, workers and all
esteemed ,
On the middle terrace Bogyoke⁷ Aung San made a
speech
On independence and freedom for us to reach ;
Finally freedom was won by the movement,
Appropriately kindled on the pagoda so eminent .



Many a festival is held on the pagoda
At different intervals of the year;
There's an annual festival of renown,
On the full moon-day of Tabaung²⁵
To mark the sacred hairs enshrinement
Celebrated with much merriment;
In days of yore there were occasions of great marts
Attracting merchants from different parts;
Now the festival is more of a fun fare
With merry-go-round, ferris wheel and loudspeaker's blare;

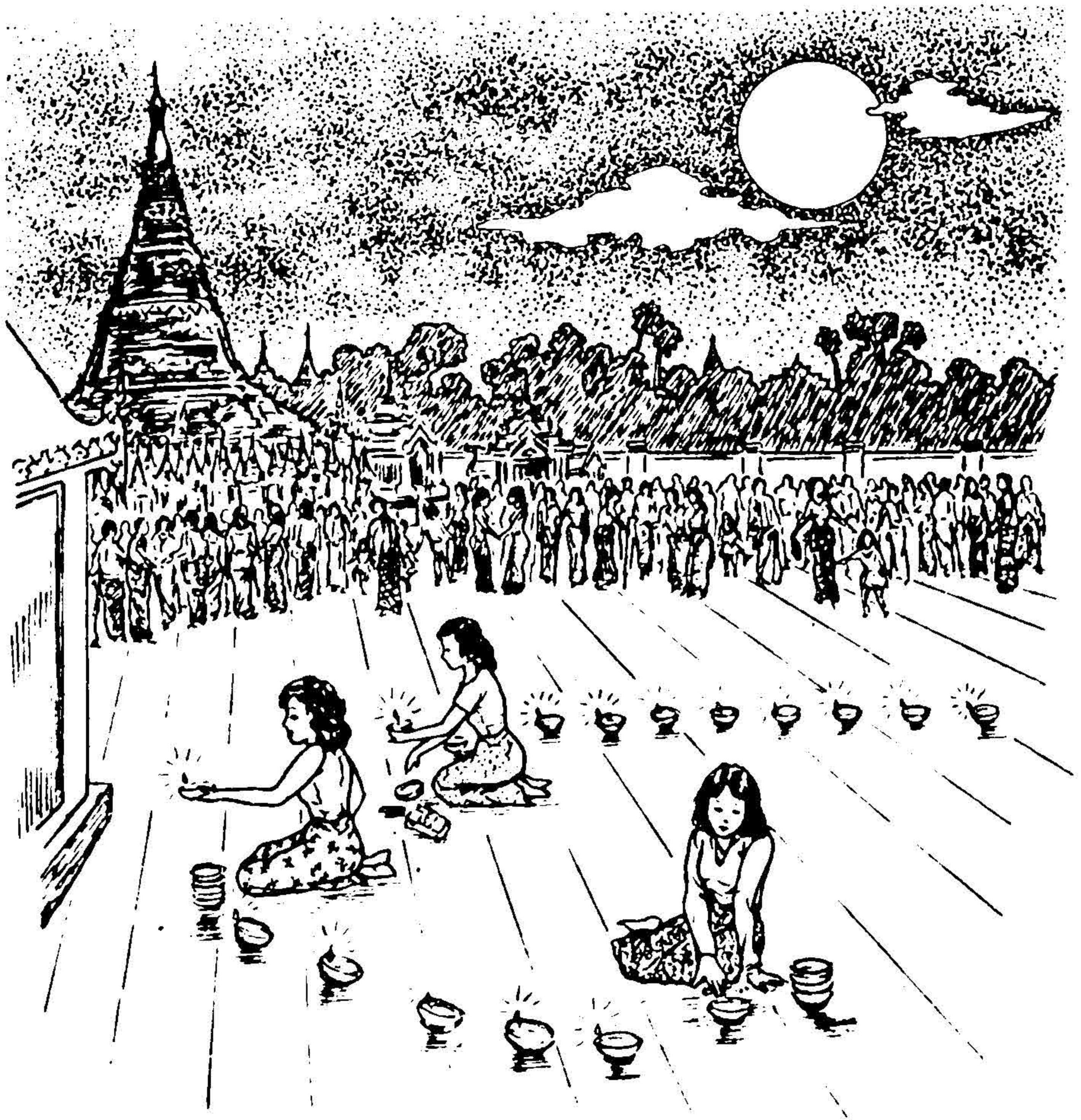
During Nyaung-Ye-Thune Pwe²¹ in the month of Kason,¹³
To the shrine flock the people of Dagon;⁹
They commemorate Lord Buddha's enlightenment
Under a Bo⁶ tree in Buddha Gaya; and the reverent
Young damsels can be seen balancing on their heads
the water pot;
A feat try to achieve I'm sure you cannot;
Taking their turns the Bo tree they water
Accompanied by music from every quarter.

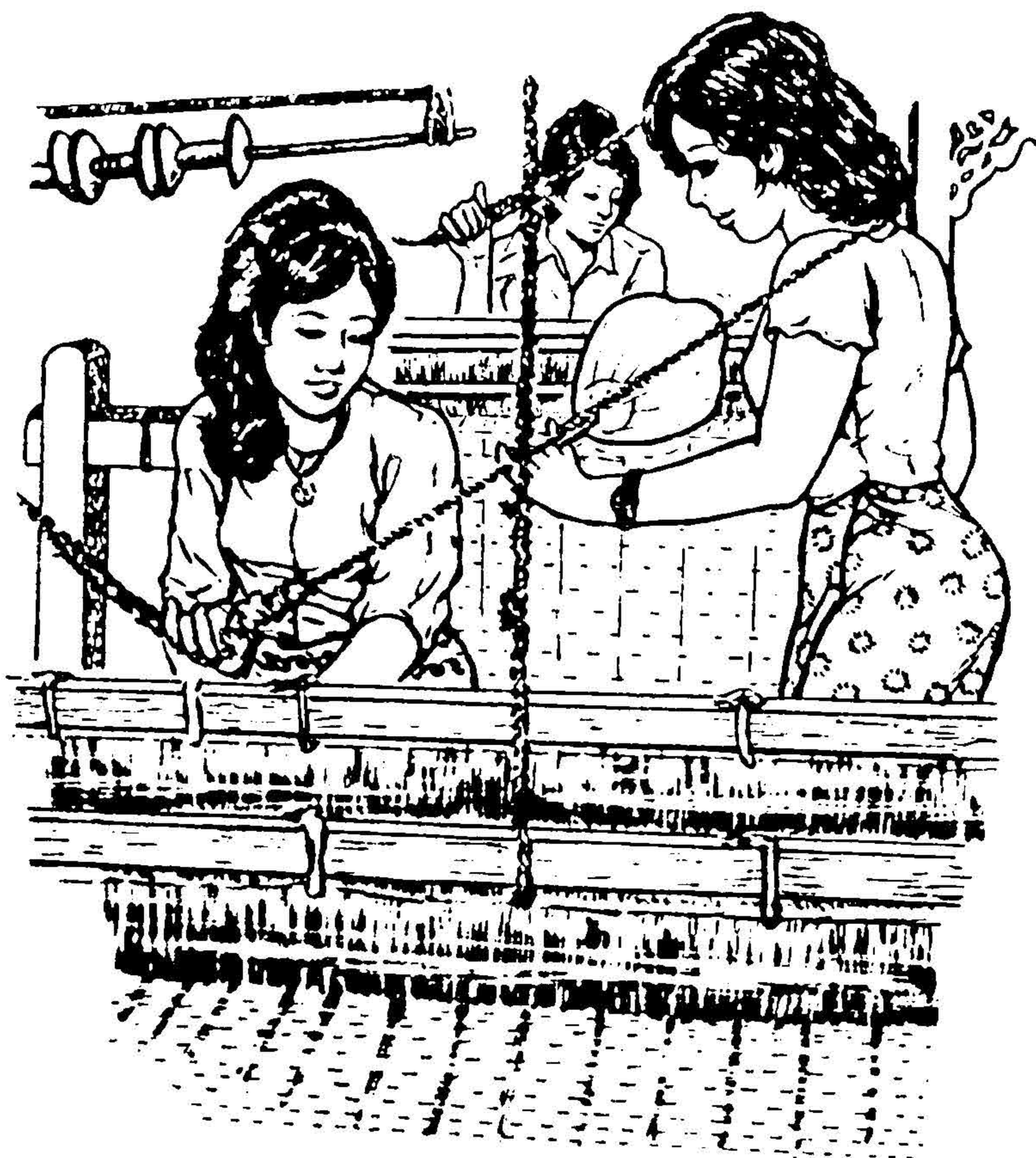




On the full moon of Wazo,²⁹ a great day,
 Offering the monsoon flowers do they pray;
 On this four-fold blessed day,
 They give their respect to the Lord's noble way;
 It marks the beginning of Lenten season
 During which the monks wouldn't journey for any reason

Tazaungdine²⁸ is the festival of light,
When the full moon comes out at night,
Little earthen lamps by the thousand with oil and wick
On the pagoda's platform they burn and flick,
Until the sky is yellow and bright
With the reflection of the myriad light;

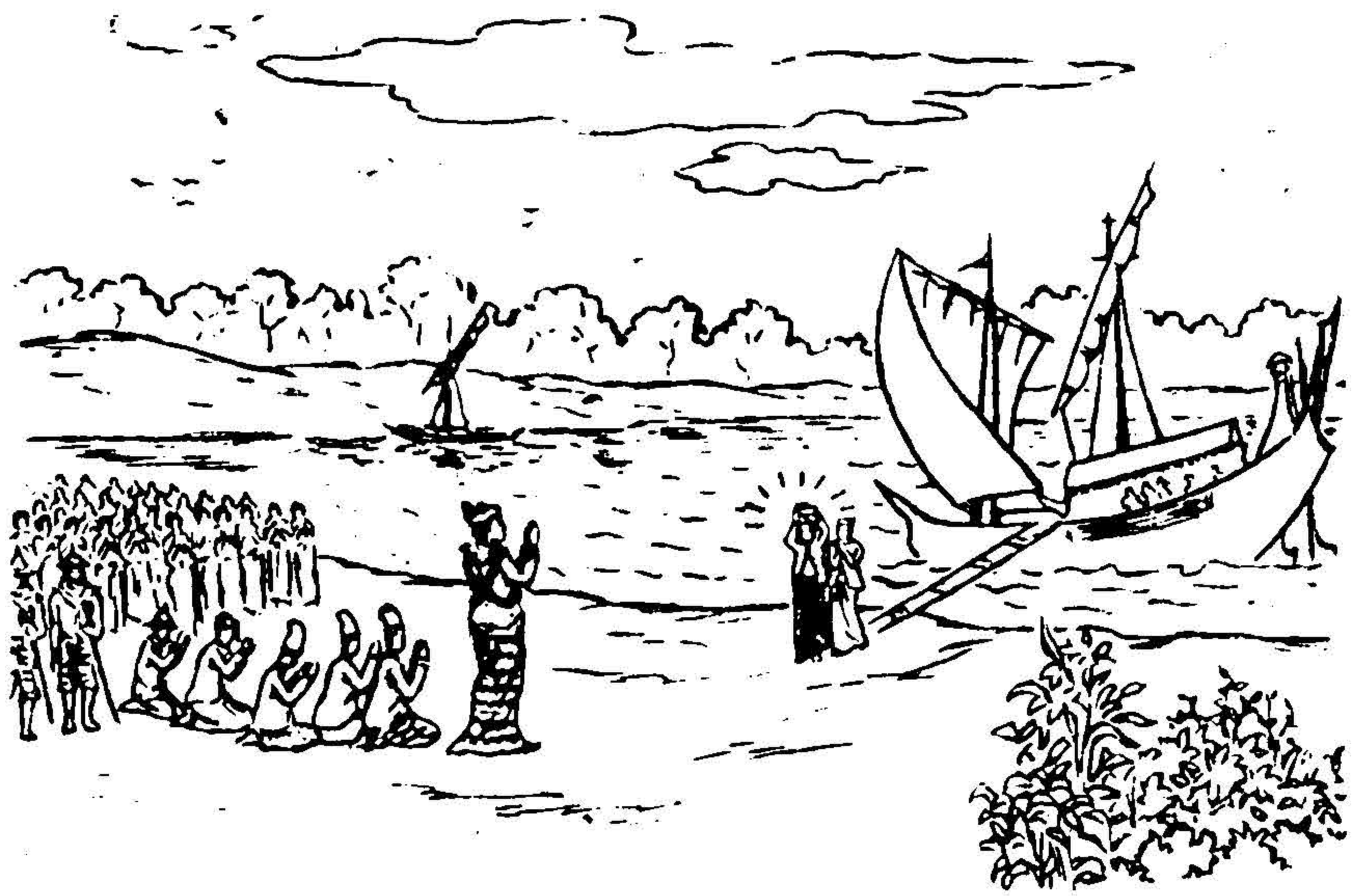




In the pavilion are the traditional looms,
For the weaving competition to be started soon ;
A sacred robe, damsels in pairs weave ;
Not until the finish they would leave
Then the offering is made before the sun
To Lord Buddha, of the Ma-thow-Thin-Gan¹⁷.



And now folks you'll like to know its history
Its legends and tradition steep in mystery ;
Some might say its beginning is far beyond,
An outhentic history to be reckoned ;
But who are you to question the belief ,
When adoring the pagoda is a relief ;
Two brothers Taphussa and Bhalika
From the province of Ukkalapa
With five hundred carts the rich merchants ,
Far and wide they travelled with their servants ,
When informed by a nat,¹⁹ of Buddha's enlightenment
They were filled with wondered and, jubilant
They at once proceeded to Buddha's presence
To pay homage and listen with reverence ,
The lord bestowed them the sacred hairs ,
Which they brought back with greatest care



King Ukkalapa heard the good news,
And come down with his retinues
To welcome the sacred hairs so precious,
Ready to perform an act of meritorious ;
He offered his crown with sixteen thousand gems,
And paid homage to the hairs, with all his men ;
A search was made for a person who knew
Singuttara hill, heard by a few ;

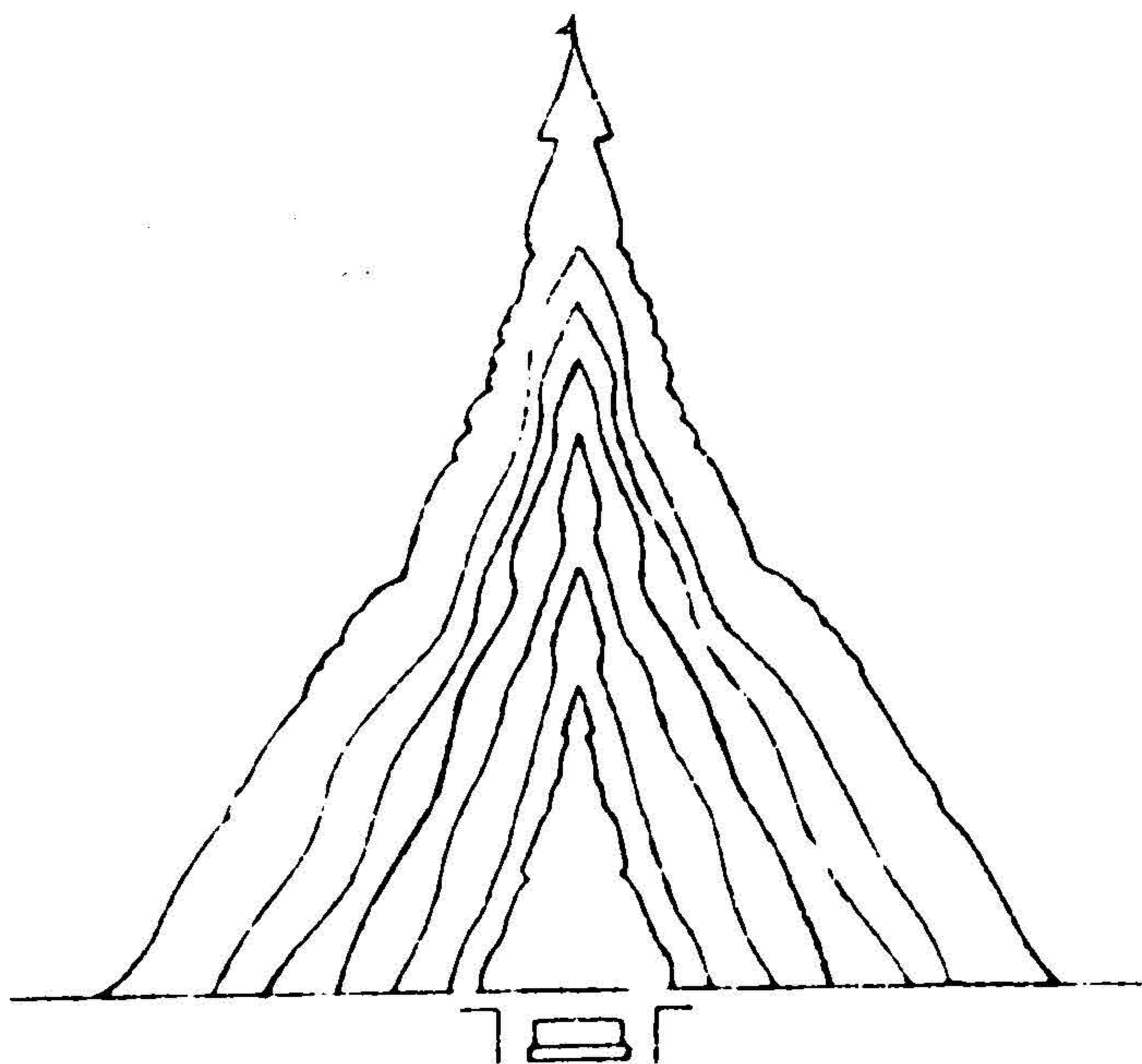
A hill into being brought by a huge centipede
That devoured elephants with greed ;
So huge was the pile of tusks and bones
Heaped together a hill had grown ;
Here the pagoda was to be constructed
That's what the Lord had instructed ;
Enshrined on this place were the relics of previous
Buddhas ,
Thousands of years before Buddha Gautama ;
There were the sacred staff of Lord Kokusandho ,
The sacred water dipper of Lord Konagamano ,
Of Lord Kassapa, His bathing robe ,
So the hill had been brought to note .

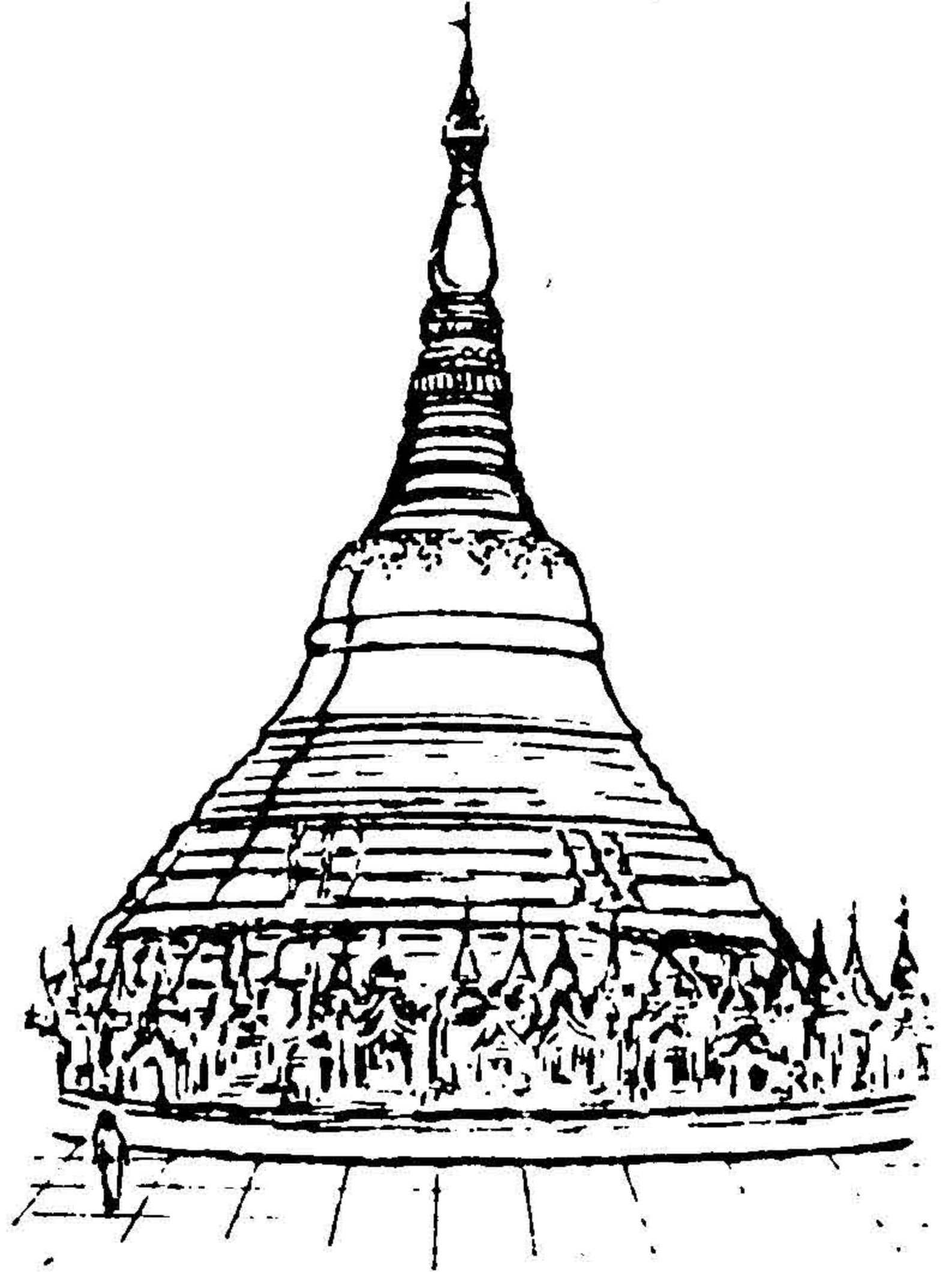
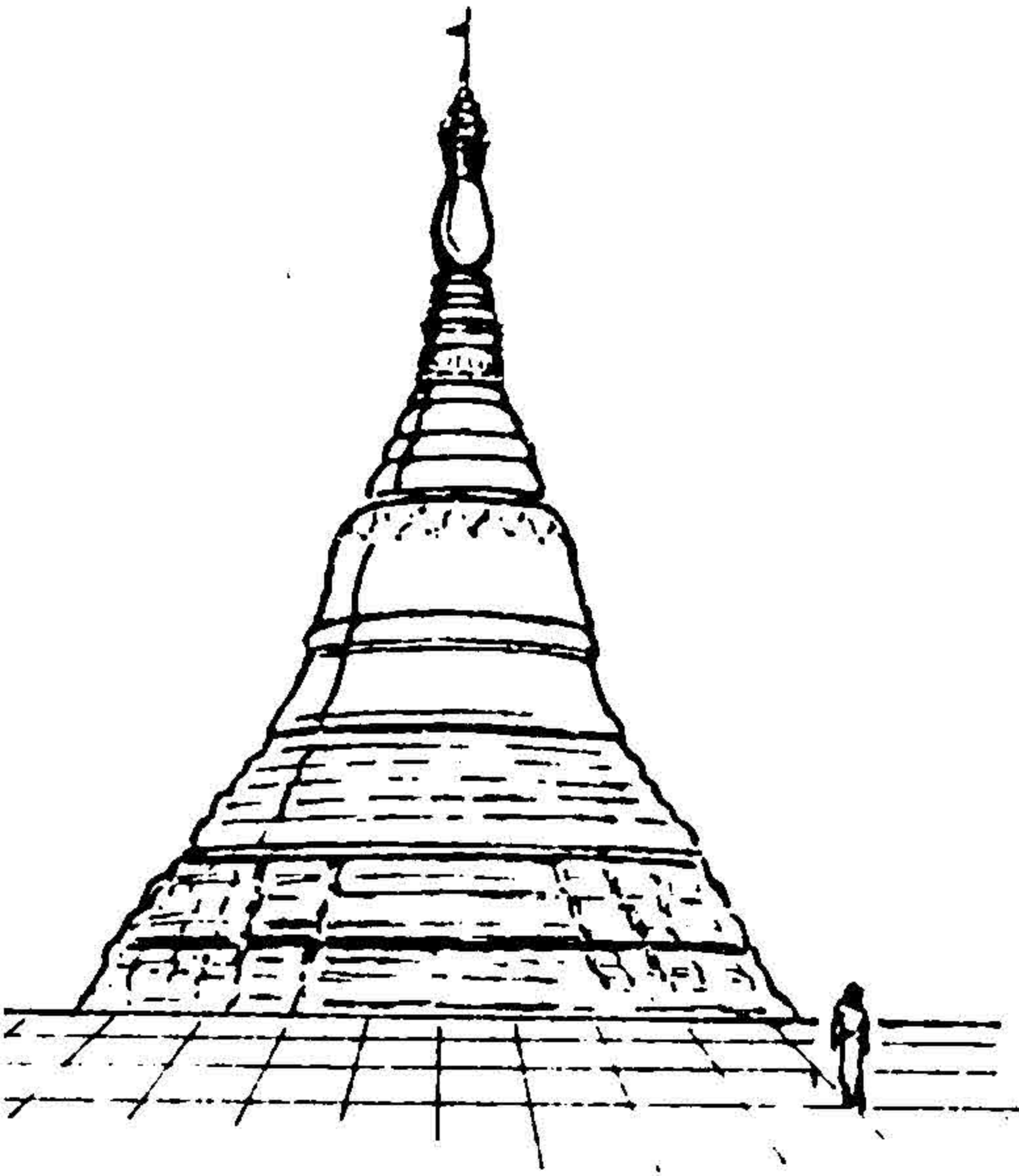
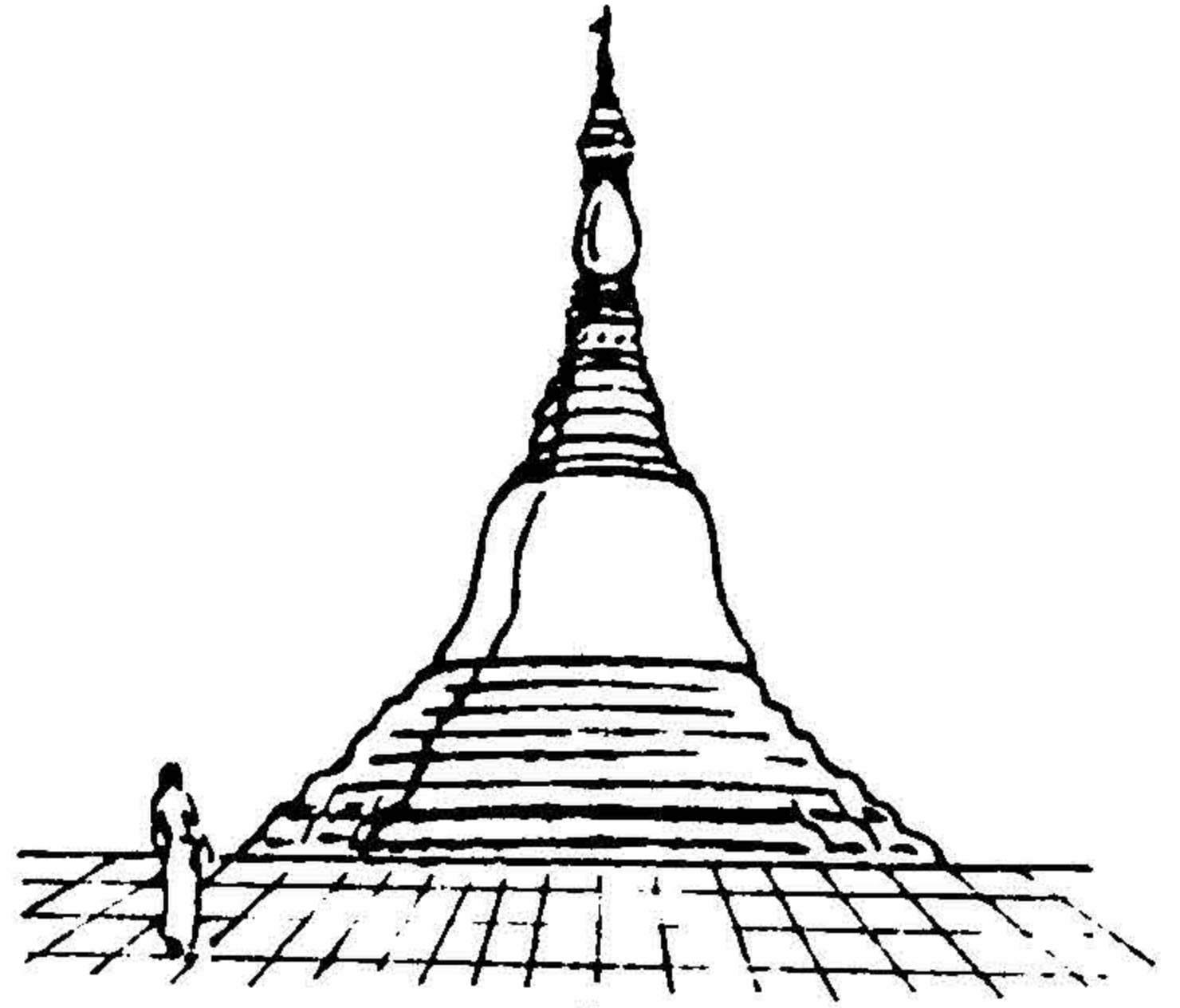
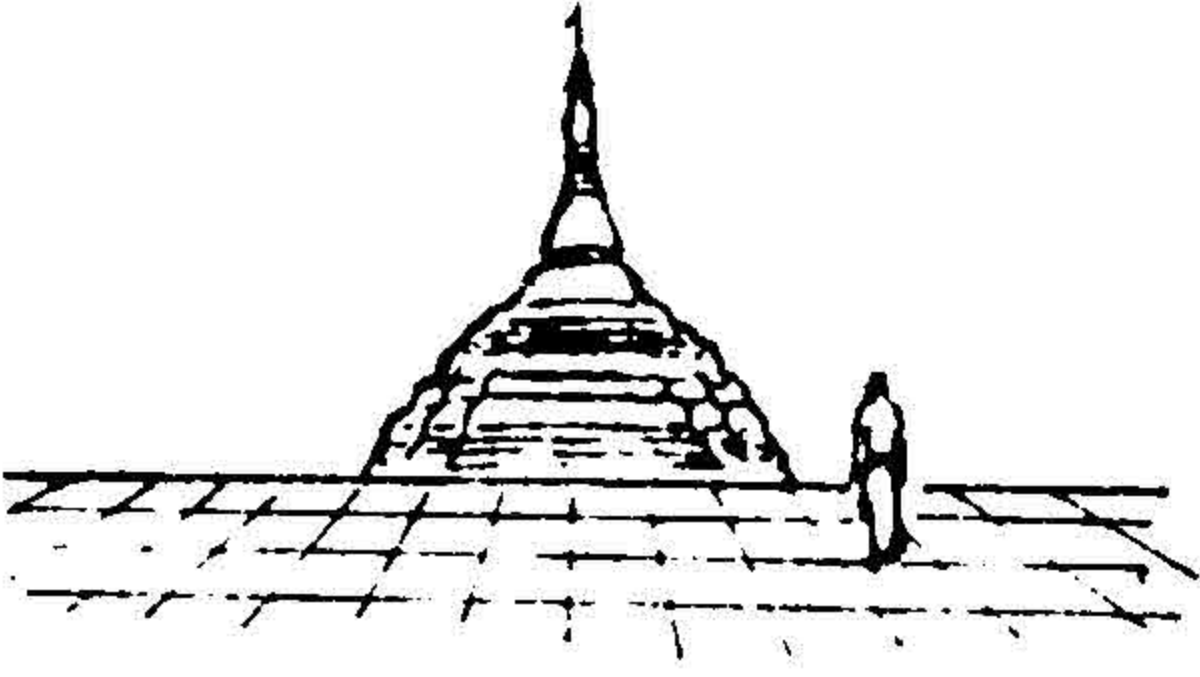




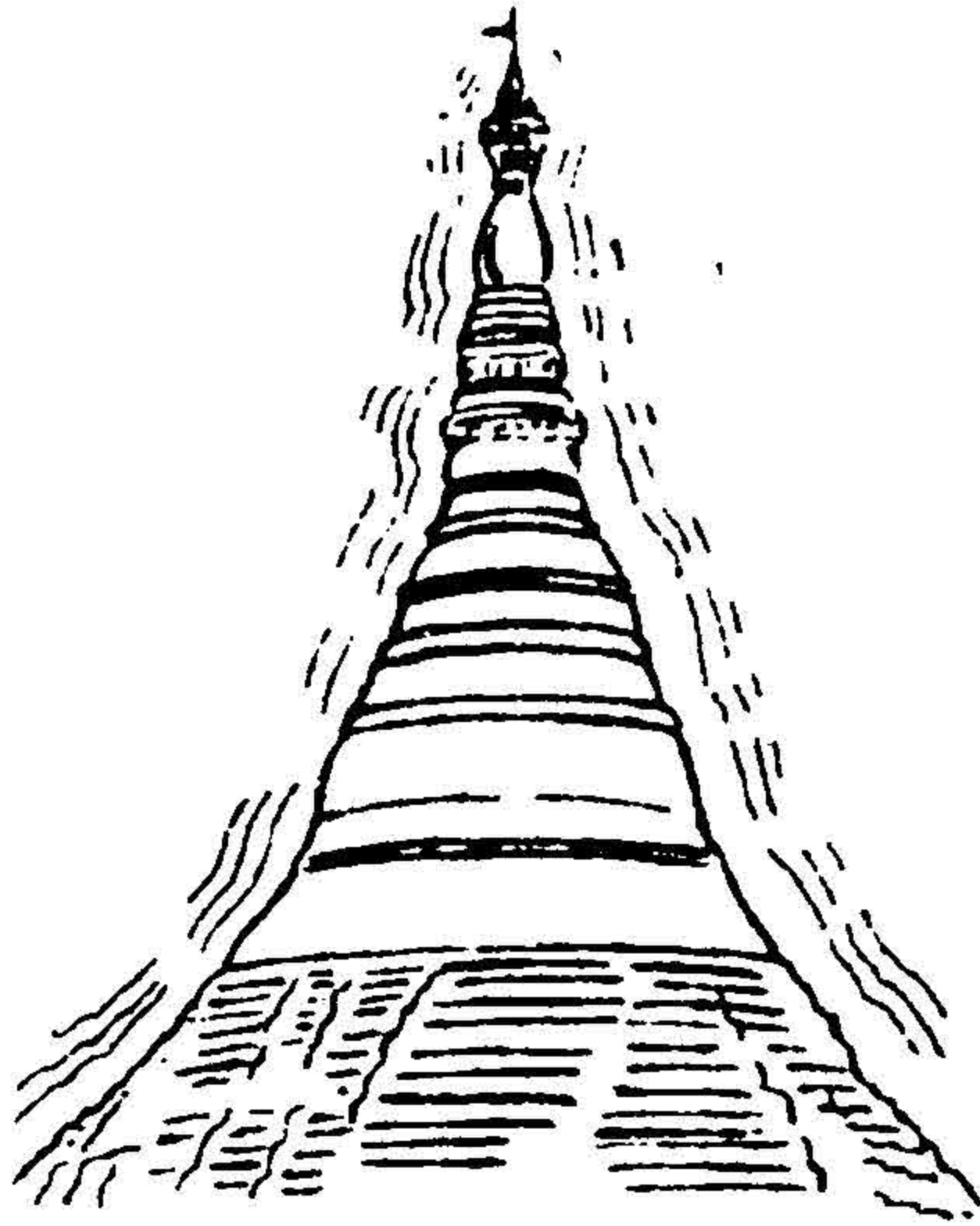
But Alas' the hill could not be found ,
Although they searched round and round ;
Sakka²³ king of the heavenly abode ,
On his Erowin¹⁰ elephant he rode ,
And came down to earth and pointed out
The exact place that's true no doubt ;
According to his commands they dug ,
The three Buddhas' belongings out of the earth ;

Together with these they enshrined the sacred hairs ,
Which they placed in the golden slab with care ;
On it a small golden pagoda was erected ,
Over which the Silver and the Tin pagoda were selected
To enclose, and again the copper
And lead pagoda were made to superimpose then the pagodas
Of marble and iron brick
Were made strong and thick ;
So folks this is the founding legend ,
I'm sure you'd be wise enough not to contend .



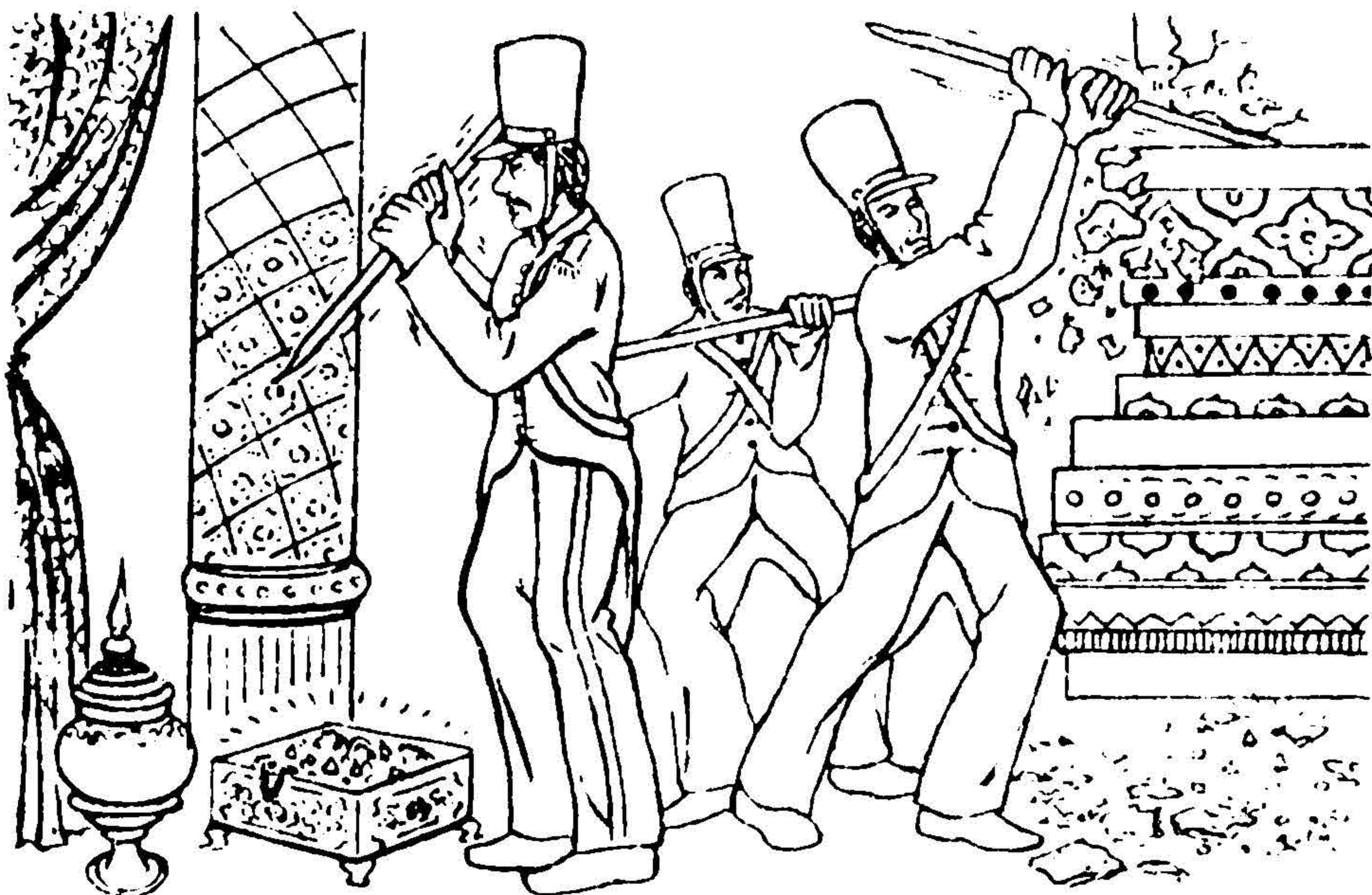


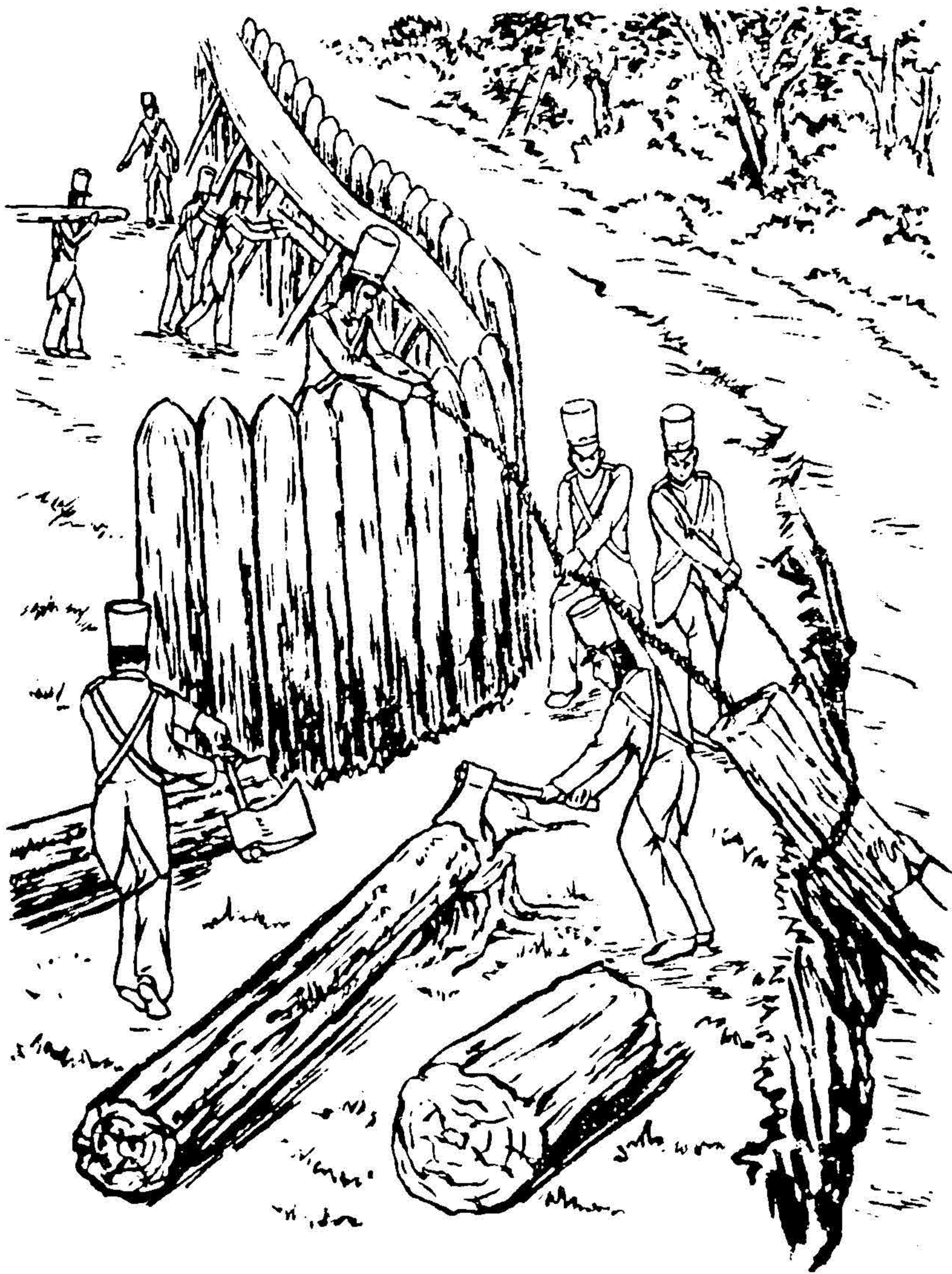
When the pagoda was first installed ,
It was twenty seven feet high in all ;
The Great Asoka² in the Second Century,
Came to worship in this sanctuary ;
Lords, nobles, kings came to pay homage ,
The rich, the poor, the young and the aged ,
And Anawrahta,¹ the founder of Burma, came down to
Dagon
To give respects to Shwedagon ;
Then King Binnya Oo⁴ made a worthy deed
By raising the pagoda to sixty feet ;
Successive kings raised the pagoda height
To make it an imposing sight ;
To 312 feet King Binnyawaru⁵ gave it a raise
Assisted by numerous followers and slaves ,
But 'twas Queen Shinsawbu²⁴ with a far sight ,
Raised it to the present height ;
All of 326 feet she gilded with gold ,
Making as if the sky were to unfold ,
An object of unsurpassed beauty
That should remain to eternity .



However Shwedagon is not above the law of Impermanence !
For when natural catastrophes made its appearance ,
Oft times in the form of earthquake shaking and shattering,
And many a time the Hti¹² suffered scattering
Sometimes sending the Hti of the pagoda flying down,
To fall with a crash on to the ground ;
But the devotees always put it back up
On top of the banana bud ;

Soon after the British invaders came,
The pagoda was left not the same,
For they had no respect for religious monument,
As shown by their actions recorded in their document ;
They spoiled, looted and killed,
And ransacked and destroyed the pagoda hill,
In search of precious stones, diamonds, rubies and gold
Emeralds, jade and things of old ;



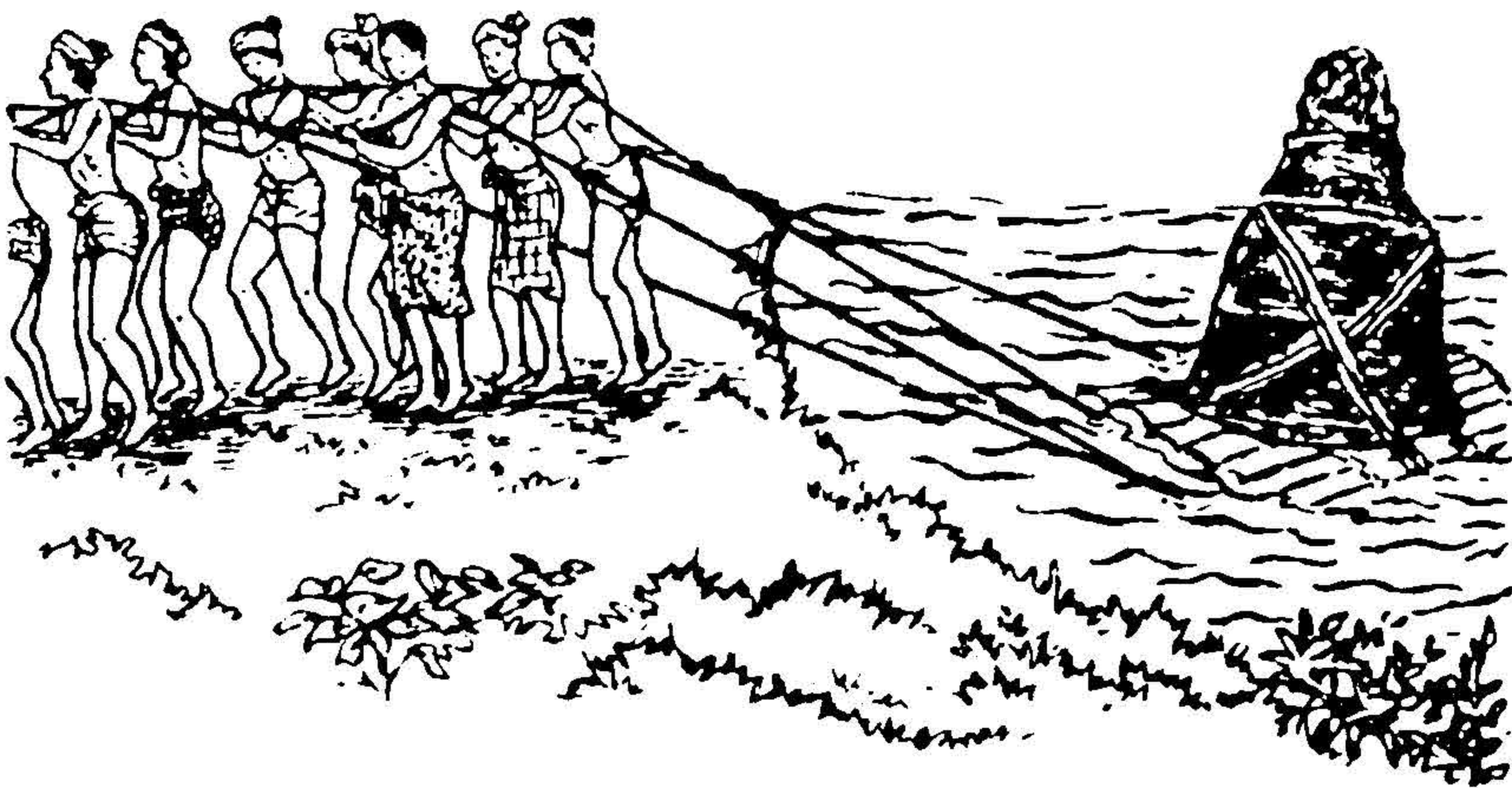


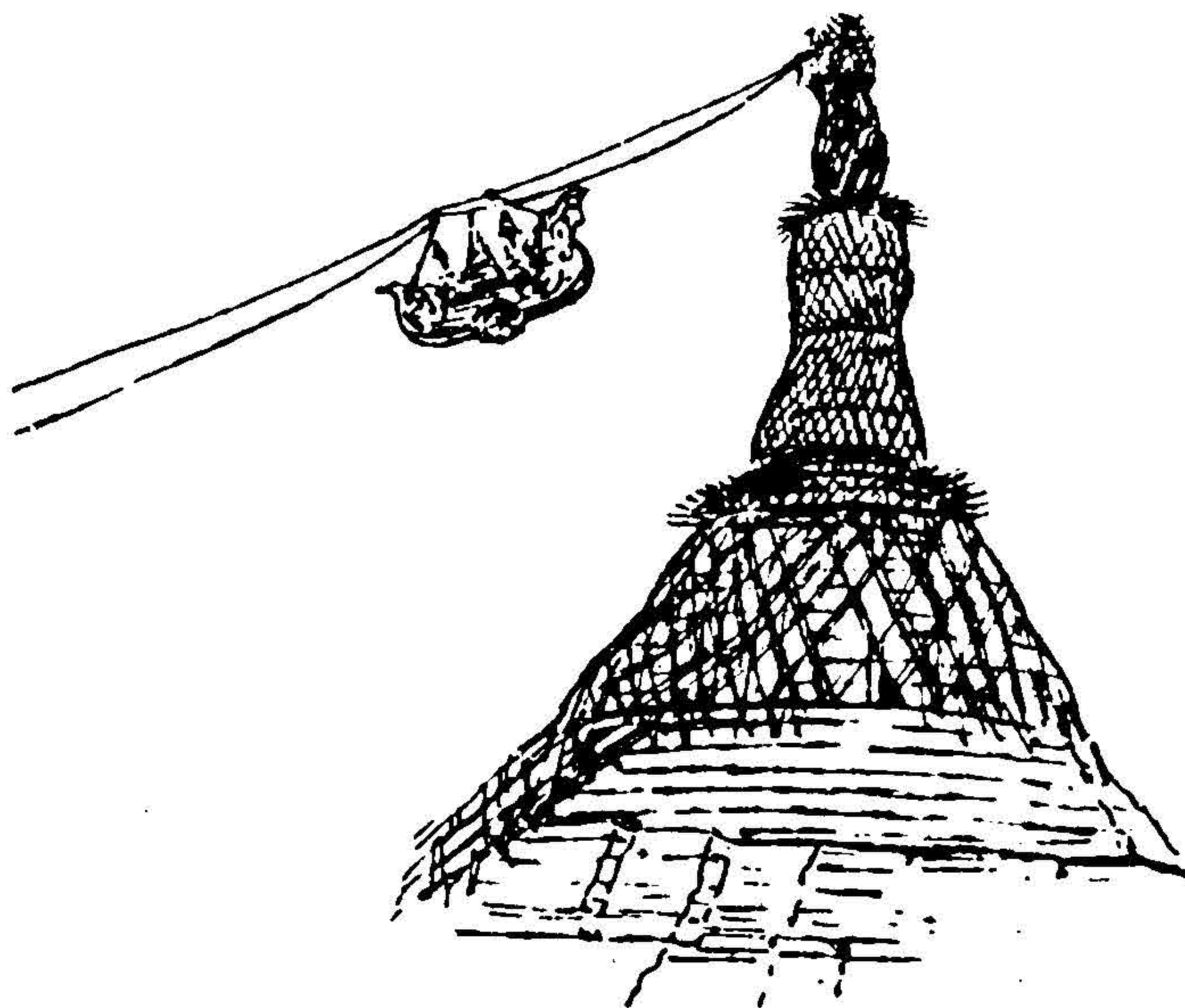
They plundered to their heart's desire
And robbed it to the last sapphire ,
Then they set up a blockade,
And turned the hill into a stockade .

The pagoda suffered from war and pillages,
And the British soldiers took the images ;
The soldiers had committed a crime,
So had the commanders of that time ;
General Campbell ordered to dig a pit,
To search for the treasures garnered in it ;
Into the pagoda's heart Frazer drove a gallery,
In the hope of obtaining the Htopana's¹¹ jewellery ;



Then the Maha-Ganda¹⁶ Bell they took,
Which was hung on a hook ;
As a war trophy the British tried to take it away,
But the bell was heavy and hard to sway ;
Strenuously they carried it to the river bank,
But on embarkation, into the water it fell and sank ;
The British engineers tried their best
To salvage it, but could not succeed in their quest :
On permission, the Burmese successfully brought up the
An amazing feat for the world to tell,
That this was an act of divine ,
'Tis not proper to rob holy things of the shrine .



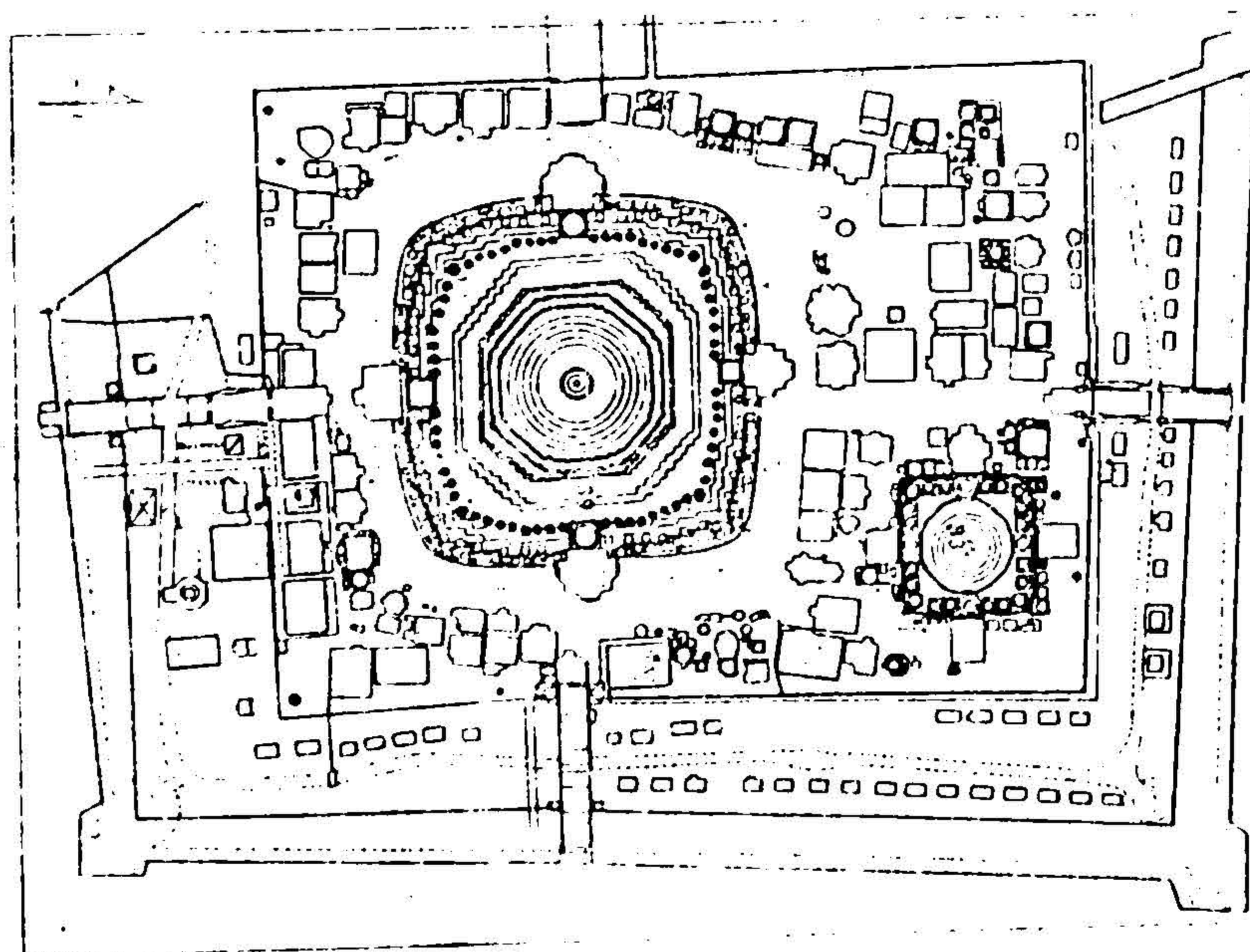


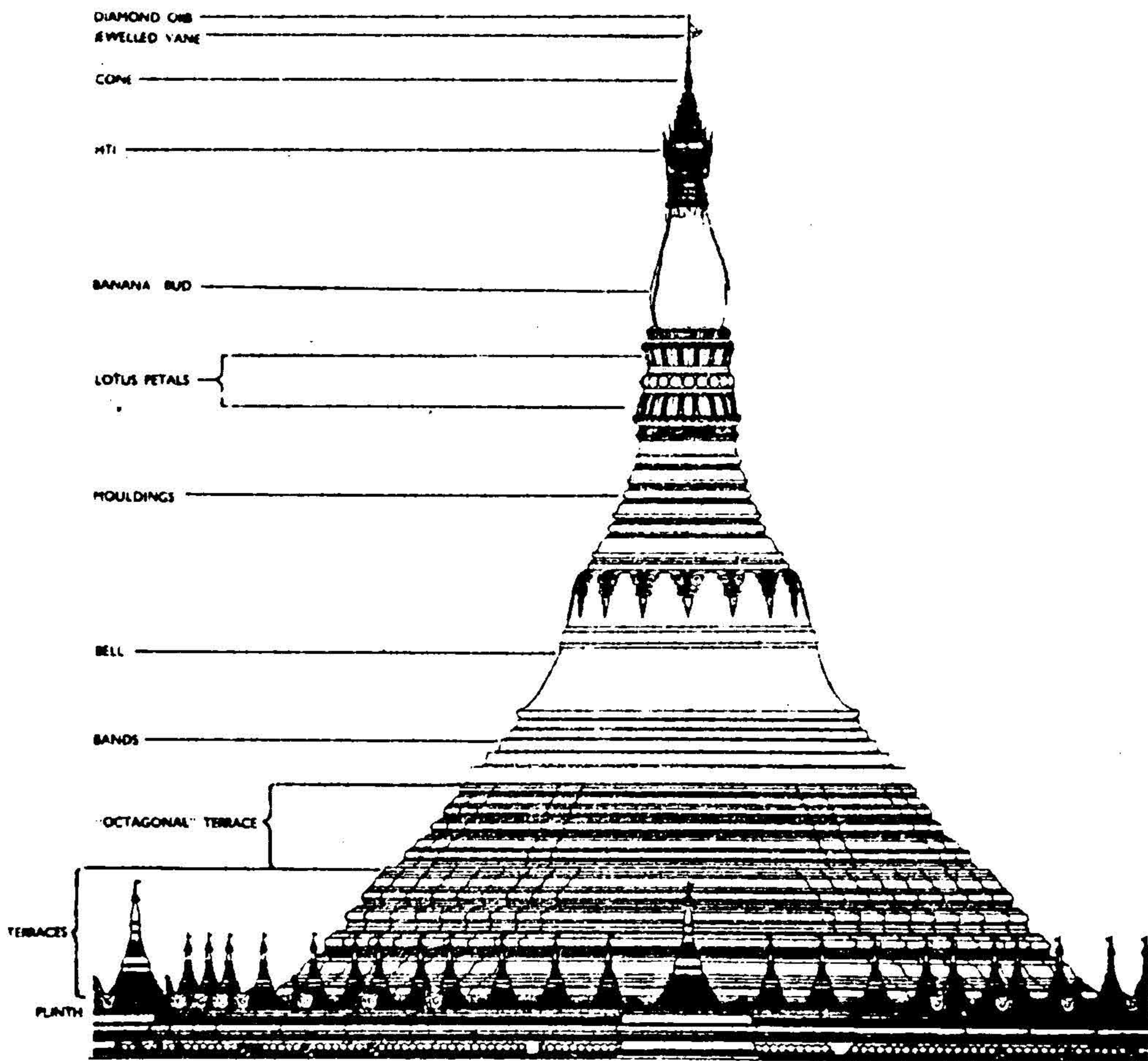
The devotees got together to restore it again,
The former glory with much pain ;
The people were called on to donate far and wide
And they responded with a great deal of pride ,
On the day when the new Hti was installed ,
A big crush was on, but the people were not galled ,
An old woman tottered up with a small piece of gold
To offer up for the peace of her soul

A country visitor unprepared for the great occasion ,
Took off his child's bangle for donation ;
Many a girl took off her ornaments from her ears
Things to her heart were so dear ;
Many a man took off his ruby ring
For the merit the offering of it would bring ;
Many a wealthy person came with a grand gift ,
In a procession that was deemed fit ;
And thus the spirit of sacrifice was shown ,
By offering gold, silver and precious stones ;
At last the pagoda was rehabilitated ,
Before everything of it was appropriated .



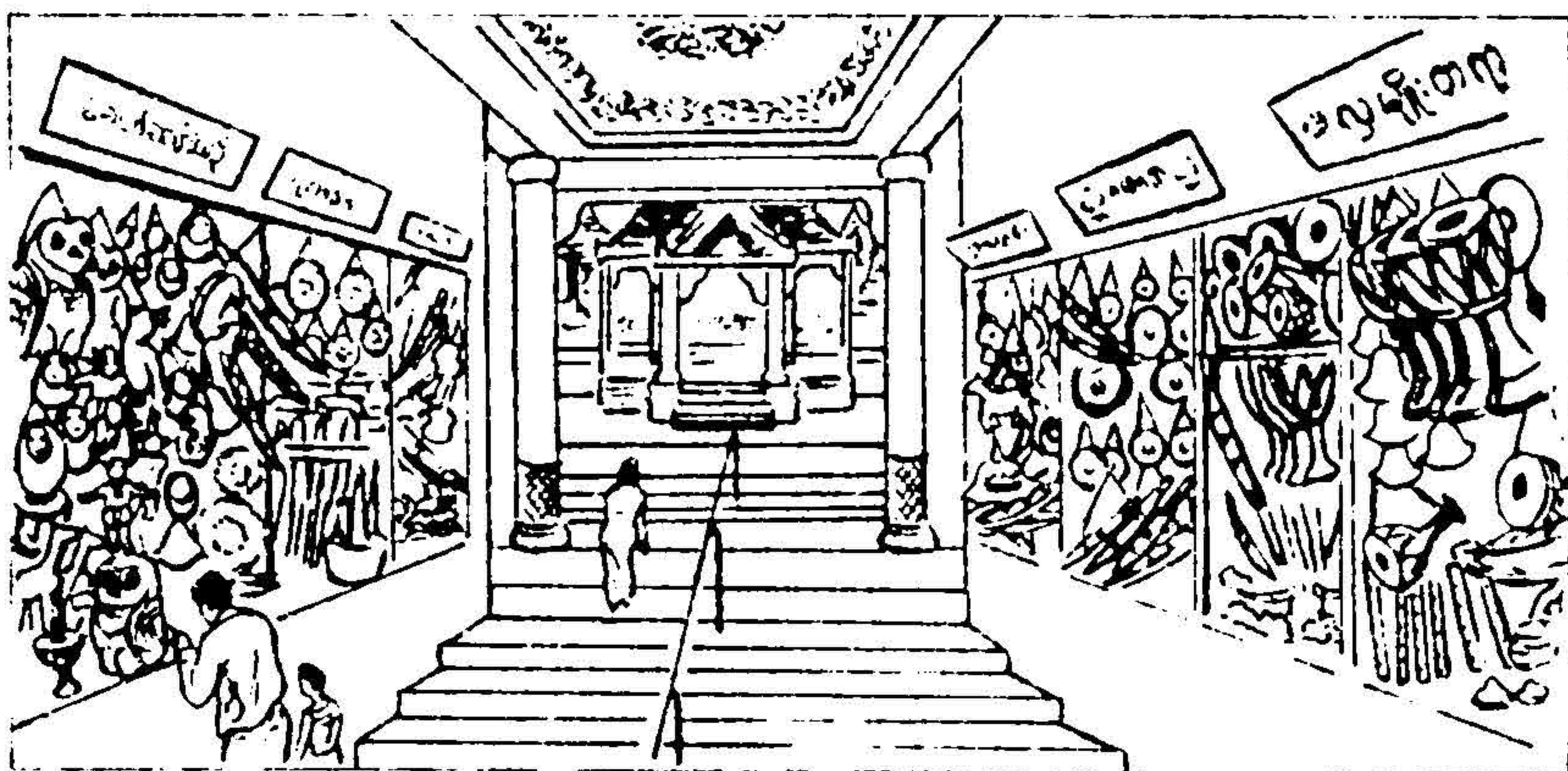
Whenever world renowned monuments are talked about,
Shwedagon would be considered no doubt ;
The pagoda is of conical structure ,
A valuable piece of architecture ;
Who the architects were, is not known
But we're proud that they're of our own ;
The area of the platform is 5.6 hectares,
The pagoda stands on a hill of 58 metres ;
The architect has expressed many diverse moods ,
The composition of several elements is really shrewd ;
Its complexity , strength and elegance
Show the architect's skill at par excellence ;
And there is an absence of consciousness ,
For the pagoda offers a feeling of completeness .





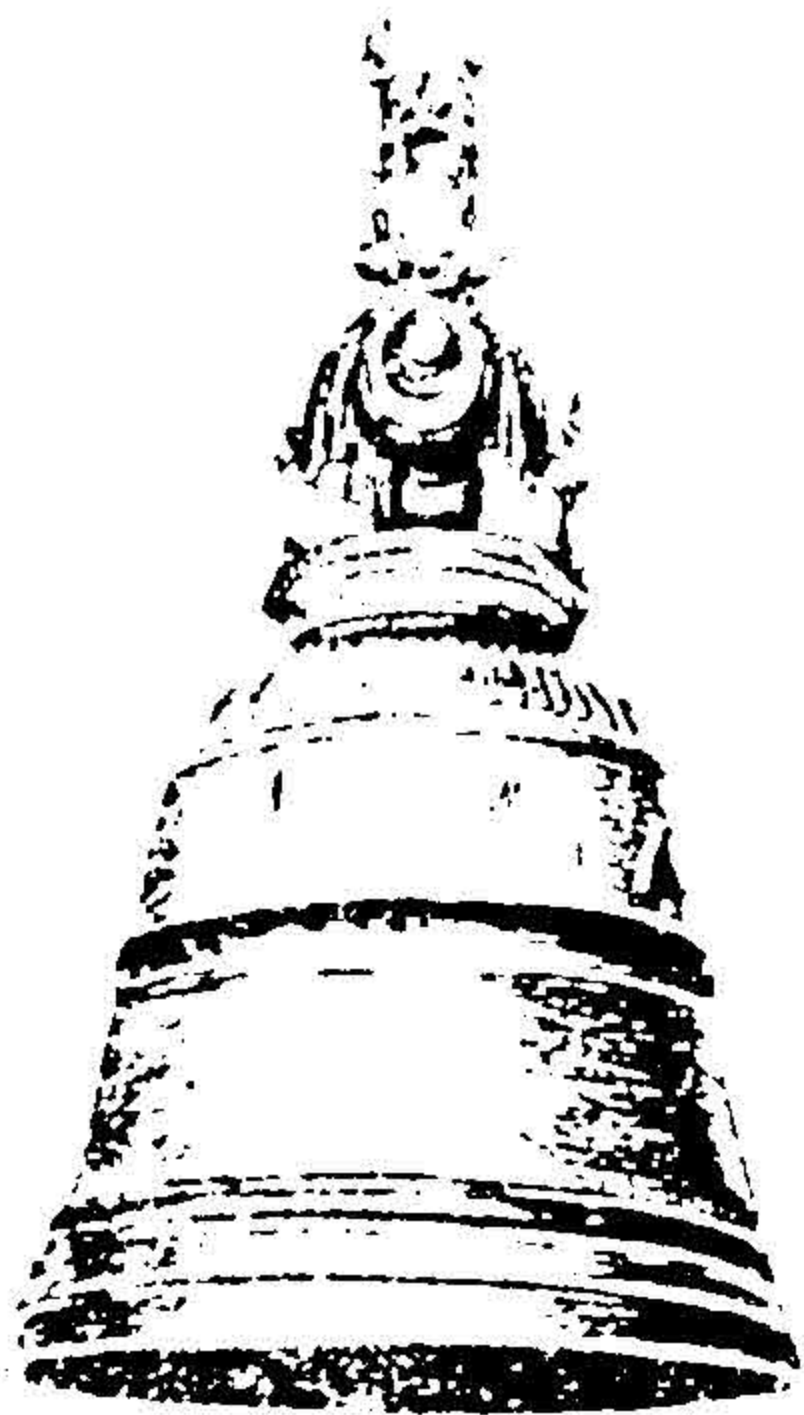
May be you'd like to know about its different parts ,
From base to apex I'll relate to you like a bard ;
The main structure rests on a plinth,
From which the column rises like a bud of hyacinth ;
The terrace is called Pyitsayan
That stands 88 feet and taller than a banyan ;
Above the terrace is the band ,
Climb on to it(men only) to see the surrounding land ;
Then comes the khaung-laung, or the bell,
To a circumference of 340 feet it sweels ;
Above the bell is the Boung Yit,
Just like a turban in a twist ;
The oramental lotus flowers called Kyor-lan
Occupy a glittering place in the sun ;
Above them is the Banana-bud thin and slender
With a height of 53 feet adding its splendour ;
Next comes the top, or the crowning Hti,
An intricate work of art for you to see ;
Then comes the pennon shoped frame called Ngetmyatna,
Or the jewelled vane bearing rubies, diamonds and sapphires ;
Finally the richest part of the Hti and topping the golden rod
Inlaid with a 76 carat diamond and jewels, is the diamond orb .

From all directions, the pagoda can be reached,
On North, South, East and West there's a passage each ;
You can ascend by stepways or lift,
Go up in any way that's convenient and fit ;
The stepway stalls are filled with goods,
Selling all sorts of carving in ivory and wood ;
The stalls vendors call out their wares,
If you care to offer for a merit share ;
The interior of the stairways are richly decorated,
With gilded columns and wood carving all elegantly
fabricated ;

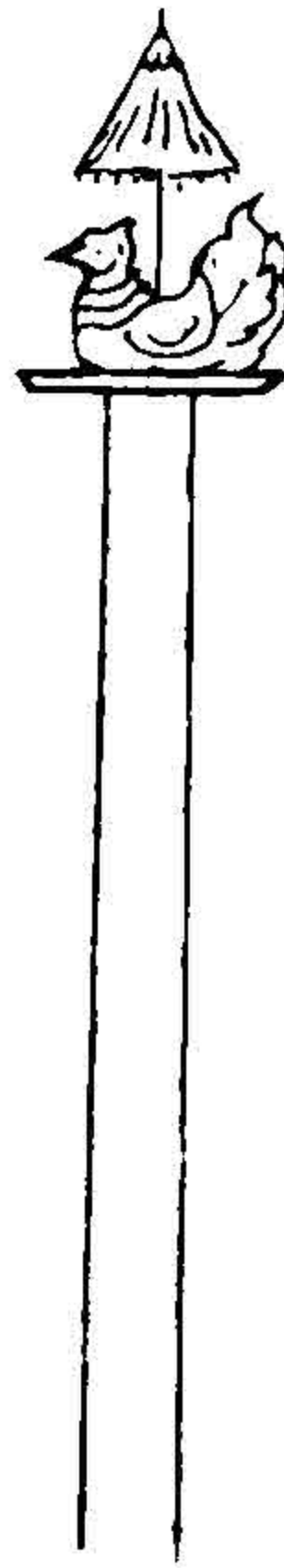




Once you gain the platform and behold the glory,
A grandeur that'll remain forever in your memory ;
The main pagoda is surrounded by smaller shrines ,
Some of which are tall and fine ;
There are several buildings big and small ,
Known as tazaung, or the prayer hall ;
And the exquisite wood carvings of the ceiling
Are a joy to the souls with an aesthetic feeling .



THITSA GANDA BELL



PRAYER POLE



NATTHA



ASHIN NECROMANCER



SALOO



TAGUNDAING POLE



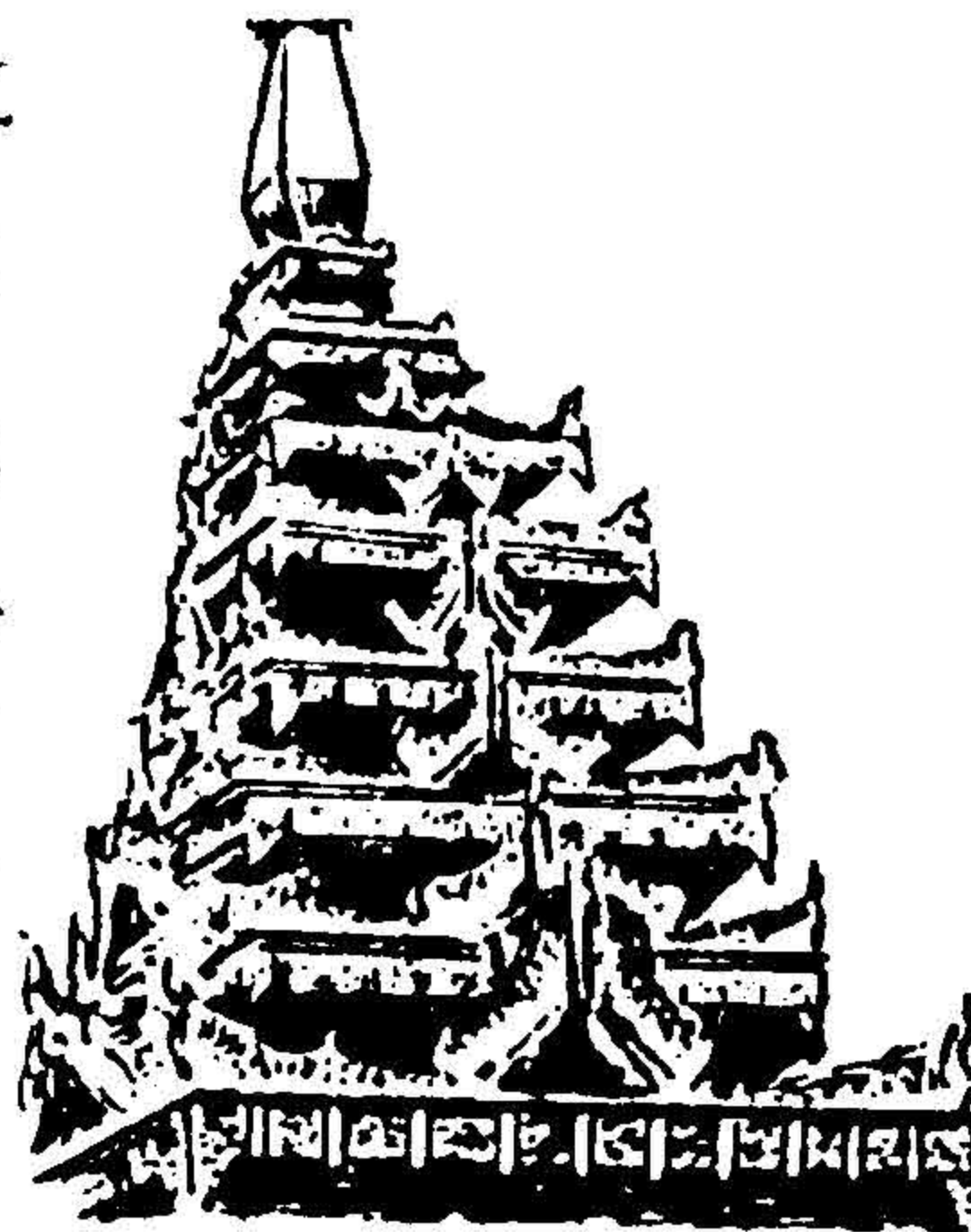
MANUTHIHA



HEAD OF SALOO
(OGP)



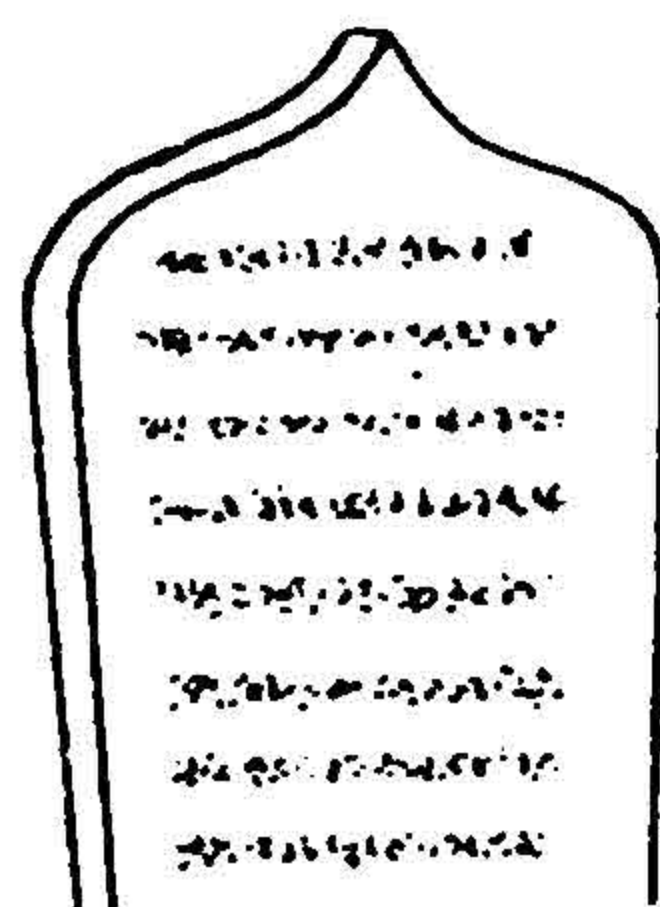
WOOD CARVINGS



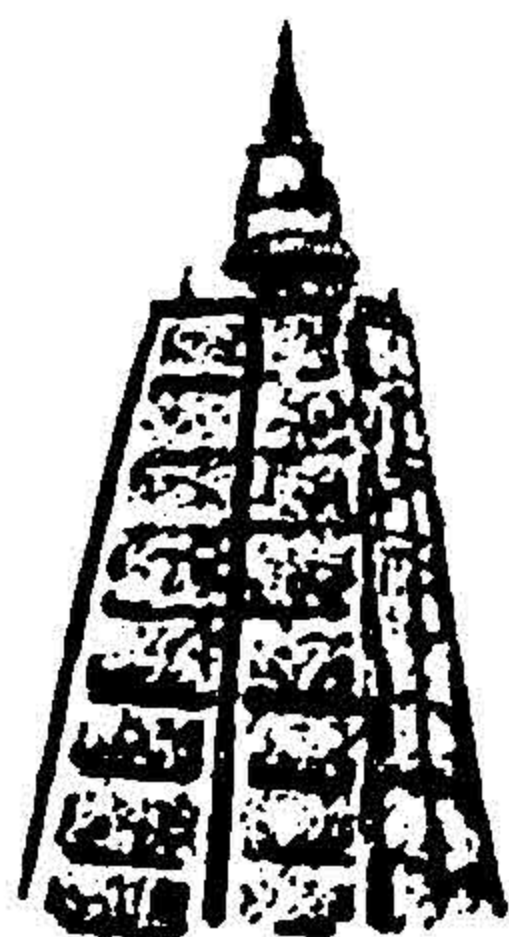
PYATHAT (A TERRACED ROOF)



SHAN UMBRELLA



STONE INSCRIPTIONS

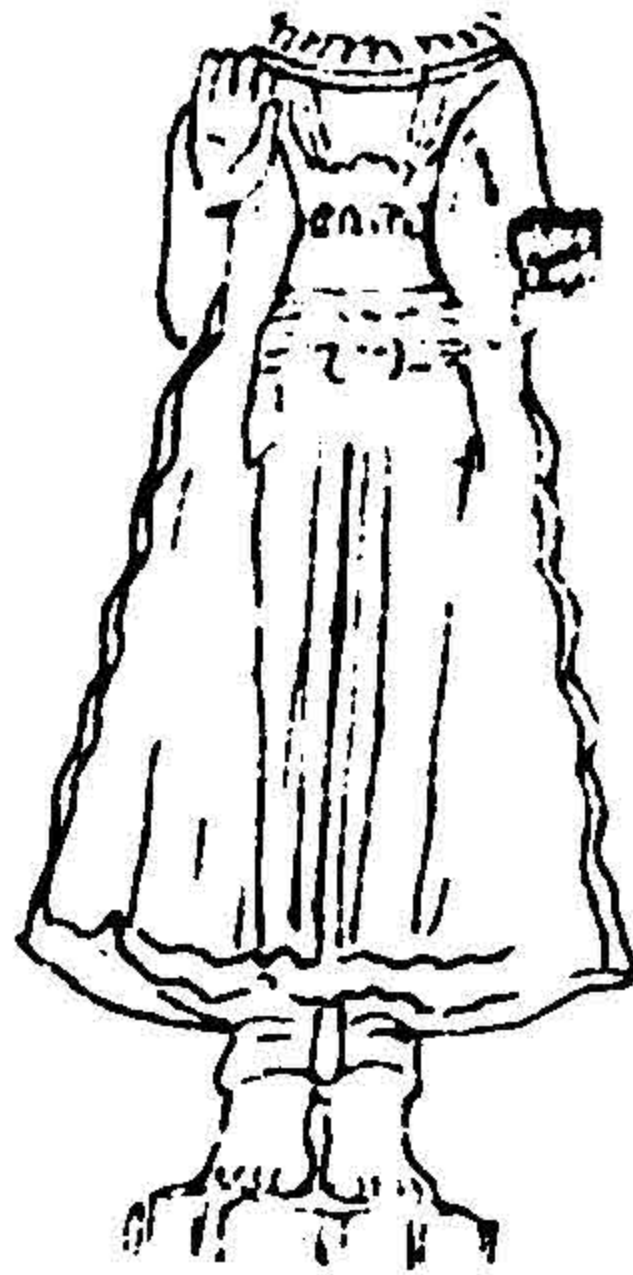


MAHABODI STYLE PAGODA



A SYMBOLIC FOOT PRINT

There are pavilions with a terraced roof,
To a fine workmanship they're a proof,
Containing several panels of wood carvings,
Most of which are of ancient and fascinating,
On the walls are legends in paintings,
Some of which are already fainting ;
Notice two umbrellas among the shrines,
They're Shan umbrella of Thai in design ;
In the eastern stepway are King Dhammezedi's inscriptions
In Pali, Burmese and Mon expressions ;
And mind don't forget to lift the oracle stone,
After letting your wish be confidentially known ;
Chedawya,⁹ a symbolic footprint of Lord Buddha
'Neath the sacred Bo tree from Budh Gaya ,
And Mahabodi¹⁵ style pagoda stand on the north ,
A design that had from India been brought forth,
There are also two Southern Indian statues,
Plus crocodiles, British lions and several figures of value ;
Indeed Shwedagon is like an art gallery
With a full store of pristine jewellery.



Finally it's befitting to conclude in text
That Shwedagon is where we can lay to rest,
All our cares, worries and troubles,
And contemplate the doctrines incomparable,
Taught to us by Gautama, our Lord,
So that with peace of mind we may ford
Through life's turbulent tide,
Ere we get to that divide,
Known as death, or the cessation of one existence,
So long as we're governed by the law of impermanence;
But by following the noble path of Buddha, we may aspire
To escape from the circle of life forever,
And attain Nirvana, the goal of all noble souls ;
Thus Shwedagon plays an important role,
In the development of our spiritual mould
Far more important than all the gold.

GLOSSARY OF BURMESE WORDS

- 1 Anawrahta The first Burmese king of the Pagan dynasty (1044),
- 2 Asoka The great Buddhist king who ruled India,
- 3 Baloo A Burmese term for Ogre
- 4 Binnya Oo The Burmese king ; 1372 (Mon)
- 5 Binnyawaru The Burmese king ; 1436 (Mon)
- 6 Bo tree The sacred Banyan tree where Lord Buddha attained his enlightenment. The same kind of tree is planted in the Shwedagon Pagoda's platform.
- 7 Bogyoke General of the army, usually Bogyoke refers to General Aung San, the founder of modern Burma.
- 8 Chedawya A foot print.
- 9 Dagon The old name of Rangoon.
- 10 Erawin The name of the elephant on which Sakka rode
- 11 Htapana The enshrined relics of the pagoda.
- 12 Hti The pagoda's umbrella.
- 13 Kason The Burmese month usually falls on May and June
- 14 Keingara A mythical bird with a human face.
- 15 Mahabodi A pagoda built according to the style of the Mahabodi pagoda in Pagan which was a replica of the pagoda in Buddha Gaya in India
- 16 Mahaganda The name of the bell meaning the great sweet sound.
- 17 Mathothingan The sacred robe for Buddha weave overnight.
- 18 Mintha A male dancer.
- 19 Nat A spirit.
- 20 Natthami A female spirit
- 21 Nyaungye-thunpwe The Burmese Buddhist festival of watering the sacred Banyan tree (Bo tree)

- 22 Nyllagan Conference.
- 23 Sakka King of the nats(same as Thagyarmín).
- 24 Shinsawbu The Burmese queen that reigns in 1453..
- 25 Tabaung The Burmese month falls on the middle of March and April.
- 26 Thagyamin King of the nats.
- 27 Tawateinda The first of the sixth abode of the nats.
- 28 Tazaungdine The festival of lights that falls in November.
- 29 Wazo The Burmese month falls on the mid of July marking the beginning of lenten season.

