

Day 6 Mandalay to Heho and Kalaw

Today was a fabulous day! First I slept until the alarm went off at 5:15 rather than waking up at 3 in the morning. We finished packing, had breakfast and headed out to our waiting car. On the ride to the airport we saw the monks lining up for breakfast. The first sighting was just on the street along the moat in front of the old palace wall. They were walking to get to wherever they needed to line up. And one straggler was running to catch up. The second sighting was at the entrance to a pagoda. They were lined up like soldiers, just under the gate. All this happened too fast for a photo, but I will remember it. Although it was very early in the morning, the walkway along the moat was full of people jogging, walking, and exercising on free exercise machines. It was very reminiscent of other Asian countries like China, Japan, Vietnam, Taiwan where you see everyone taking good care of themselves and exercising in the early morning hours.



The rule here is get to the airport about 1.5 hours early as once everyone is there the plane might leave before the scheduled time. We had to go through security with all our bags first, check in, get our stickers (this time beige with a picture of the old palace), go through immigration (not sure why as this was all domestic), go through security again with our carry-on bags, and sit and wait for the plane to arrive. Once the bus took us to the plane, we boarded up the narrow, little steps into the propeller plane for open seating. The Mann Yadanarbon airline 25 minute flight to Heho was uneventful.



But, as we approached Heho, the landscape became magical. It was like a patchwork carpet with brilliant colors (even from up in the sky) of red, yellow, dark green, light green (which we learned later was ginger). And all surrounded by mountains and sparkling lakes and blue tiled roofs. It was truly magnificent.



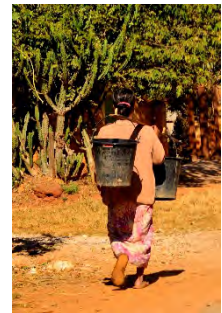
Heho is the gateway to the Southern Shan state and to Inle Lake. The airport was a tiny landing strip so our luggage was brought out very quickly on a wooden cart. We were led to our car and new driver and hit the road. We had a one hour drive on the "new" road to Pindaya, in the Shan State. There is an old road, which we took on the way back, but the new road is faster. And this new road, all of 1.5 lanes wide, is a toll road with a small booth and guard to take the money. Our driver barely stopped as he reached out the window and handed the money over.

We had to share the road with oncoming traffic which was mostly trucks, tractors or oxen. And motorcycles. Of course there are lots of motorcycles. This is the new road which is both faster and more beautiful. And although this is the new road, there were quite a few detours onto unpaved paths taking us right through the villages. At one point we were surrounded by cows, who very smartly moved out of our way, although I think they could have won.





The new road took us through the country side, farms, temples, oxen drawn carriages, horse and buggies. There were low stone walls with glass chards. The majority of the people in this area are farmers, but they live in the villages, often a one hour walk from their fields which they often share with each other. When it is time to go to market, they take turns. And walking is their primary source of transportation.



Most villages have no running water. There are "lakes" every now and then, also often an hour walk from the village where they take their laundry (carrying it on their heads) once every few days. Imagine then carrying the wet laundry for an hour on your head, back to your village. They also wash themselves in these same lakes. That is their bath. And you can clearly see how they wash in public but still maintain their modesty and privacy. We saw one woman, standing on the bank of the river, combing out her long, beautiful hair. Paul Gauguin could not have painted a more beautiful picture.





We drove past a school and both Ben and I shouted out for the driver to stop. What an opportunity to watch the kids playing in the yard at recess. To listen to their laughing and calling out to each other. It did not matter that some were monk novices. It did not matter that we could not understand them. They all spoke the universal language of children and we enjoyed watching them for a few minutes. Then suddenly they all lined up and marched back into their classroom. And we continued on our way.

If I thought the landscape was beautiful from high above, it was even more so driving through it. It was a patchwork quilt again, but this time close up. Every now and then there would be a cherry tree in full bloom. Or trees forming natural tunnels and sculptures – better than any work of art - against the blue sky. While in Bagan there was little water and a low tide, here there is much more rain, more water and greener fields of mango, banana, rice, sunflowers, passion fruit. There were bright, bright green patches of ginger. And the soil was a bright red. The colors took my breath away.





Our destination was the Pindaya Caves in the town of Pindaya on the Pone Ta Lote Lake. And here on the lake people were also bathing and doing laundry at the foot of the stairs leading into the water.

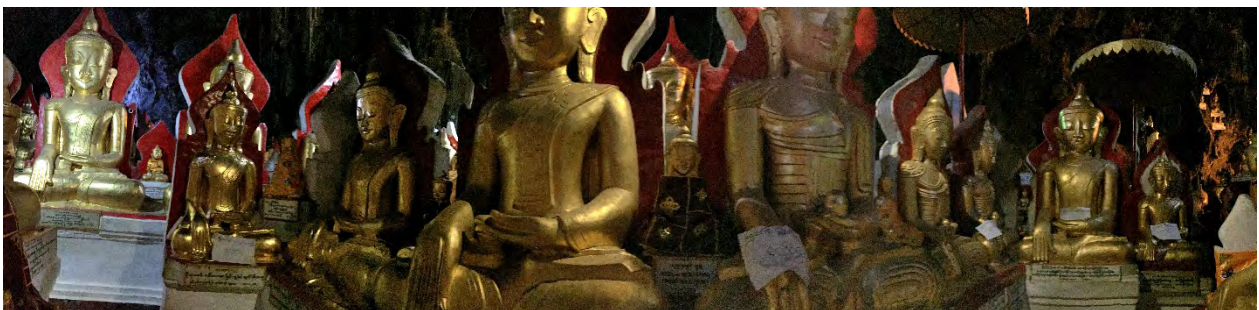
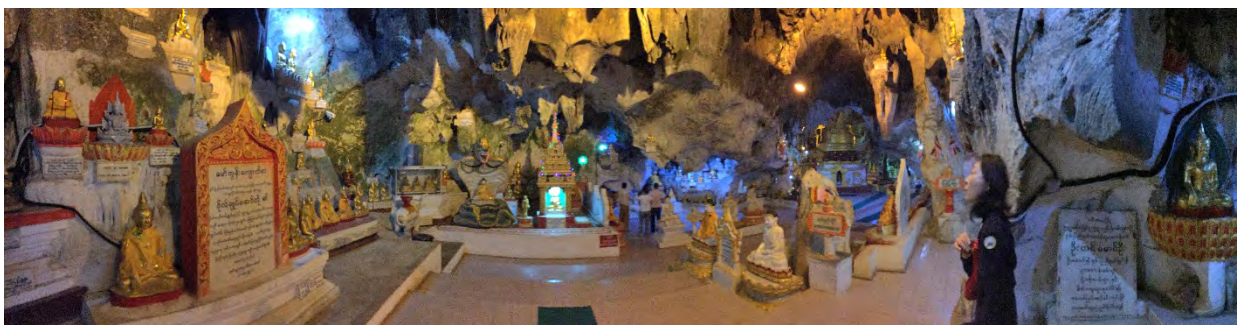
There are several ways to get to the top of the mountain to enter the Pindaya caves. One way involves walking up hundreds of steps from the bottom to the top. The stairway is covered with what looks like red aluminium. And on top of each step, near the roof, is the name of a donor. The other way to the top is to drive up and be dropped off at the entrance, walk up just some of the steps and take an elevator up the rest of the way. You can guess which approach we took. But the view from the top, of the long, winding red covered stairway, the gold stupas at the bottom and the fields beyond, was quite beautiful.



There are many legends surrounding the Pindaya cave. One is that a blocked-off path at the end of the cave leads to the Bagan. The more bizarre part is at the front of the entrance where there is a giant, mean-looking spider and a Prince aiming his bow and arrow at it. The legend is that once a giant spider lived in the cave. One day the spider captured a local Princess and held her captive in the cave. According to the legend, the Prince, armed with bow and arrow, killed the spider, thus rescuing the Princess. And the name Pindaya, means chasing the spider.

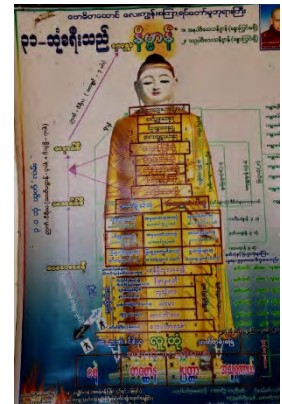


But as beautiful as the view was, and as unexpected as the spider was, the real surprise came when we entered the cave. The Pindaya Caves are a pilgrimage site located on a limestone ridge of the mountain. And why? These caves in the middle of the mountain are filled with thousands of Buddha images in different styles and from different eras. Over 8000 of them! Maybe over 9000. The real number is unclear. They cover just about every inch of the cave, along with stalagmites and stalactites. Most are gold, including the large one at the entrance where devotees continue to place gold leaf. Some are ivory. One is teak wood. One is jade. Two are called perspiring Buddha and are all black. Many recent ones were donated by individuals from around the world. But the original ones are believed to be from the second half of the 18th century.

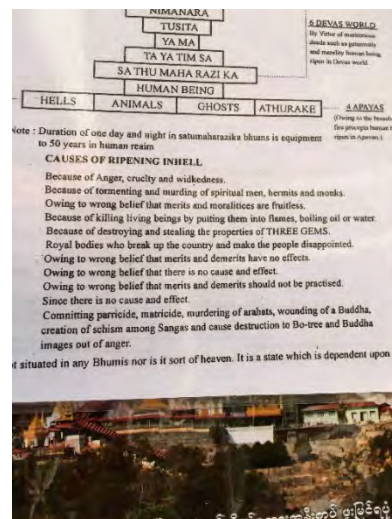
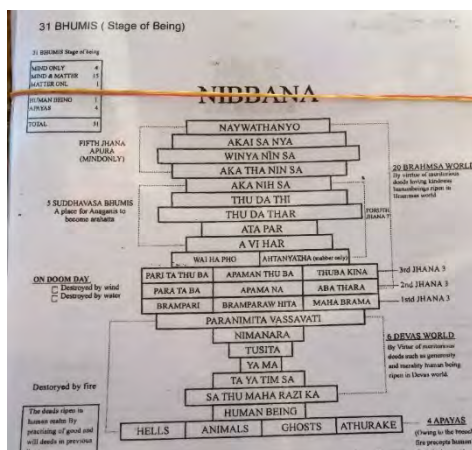


It was here that Toe explained why we go barefoot and don't wear socks. You would never carry the dirt from the socks to the Buddha (but I couldn't help wondering what about the dirt from the feet). It is also here that we learned about Nirvana and how to get there. I hope I have the explanation correct, or at least close. If not, I'm hoping Toe reads this and corrects me.

There are 20 levels in this world that one has to pass through in a lifetime to reach Nirvana. Depending on how many you pass, and what kind of life you live, you return either one of the 6 levels in the Devas World (which at its lowest level includes hell, animals and ghosts) or to the better world. There are 7 kinds of hell, none of which you want to be in. The things that send you to hell include anger, cruelty and wickedness. The rest are listed in the photo.



To get to Nirvana, you have to pass through each level, but if you donate and earn merits, you can by-pass some of the levels. Rather than copying all that the signs said and trying to remember all that Toe taught us, I have enlarged them so you can read them. The rules are very specific. And this is the basics of Buddhism.



THE WAY TO NIBBANA
 NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMĀSAM BUDDHASSA

ALL BEINGS ARE SUBJECT TO SUFFERING. TO MAKE THE SUFFERING END, VIPASSANĀ (INSIGHT MEDITATION/CONTEMPLATION) MUST BE PRACTISED. WHEN THE BUDDHA APPEARS IT IS POSSIBLE TO PRACTISE VIPASSANĀ. WHOEVER WISHES TO FOLLOW THE VIPASSANĀ PRACTICE, HE AT FIRST MUST PURIFY HIS SĪLA (MORALITY). DEPENDING ON THE PURIFICATION OF SĪLA, IT IS POSSIBLE TO CULTIVATE SAMĀDHI. THROUGH THE POWER OF SAMĀDHI ONE IS ABLE TO CONTEMPLATE THE OBJECT THAT MANIFESTS IN HIS OWN SENSE. WHATEVER MENTAL ACTIONS APPEAR ONE MUST CONTEMPLATE THEM. WHATEVER PHYSICAL ACTIONS APPEAR ONE MUST CONTEMPLATE THEM. WHEN HE CONTEMPLATES MIND AND MATTER, HE SEES THE INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTIC. WHEN HE SEES THE INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTIC, THE UNIVERSAL CHARACTERISTIC, ANICCA (IMPERMANENT), DUKKHA (SUFFERING), AND ANATTA (SOULLESSNESS), WILL COME INTO MANIFESTATION. HE SEES MIND AND MATTER AS IMPERMANENT. WHAT IS IMPERMANENT IS SUFFERING. WHAT IS SUFFERING IS SOULLESS. IF HE SEES IMPERMANENCE, HE SEES SUFFERING. IF HE SEES SUFFERING, HE SEES SOULLESSNESS. IF ONE SEES SOULLESSNESS, HE SEES NIBBĀNA. ON SEEING NIBBĀNA ALL KĪLESAS ARE ERADICATED. BY ERADICATING KĪLESAS, KAMMA BECOMES CEASED. ON THE CESSATION OF KAMMA THE RESULTS OF KAMMA WILL BE NO MORE. THEN ALL SUFFERINGS ARE IN END. THIS IS THE STATE OF NIBBĀNA A PEACEFUL BLISS.

HOW TO PRACTISE MEDITATION CONTEMPLATION
 BE SEATED CROSSED LEG OR ON THE FOLDED KNEES SO THAT TO SIT LONG-LASTING.

ON SEEING NIBBĀNA ALL KĪLESAS ARE ERADICATED. BY ERADICATING KĪLESAS, KAMMA BECOMES CEASED. ON THE CESSATION OF KAMMA THE RESULTS OF KAMMA WILL BE NO MORE. THEN ALL SUFFERINGS ARE IN END. THIS IS THE STATE OF NIBBĀNA A PEACEFUL BLISS.

HOW TO PRACTISE MEDITATION CONTEMPLATION
 BE SEATED CROSSED LEG OR ON THE FOLDED KNEES SO THAT TO SIT LONG-LASTING. CLOSE THE EYES AND MIND WHAT YOU FEEL AS MUCH AS YOU CAN. BE MINDFUL THE INHALE AND OUTHALE OR RISING AND FALLING OF THE ABDOMEN. KEEP WATCH AS IT IS THIS; COLD, HOT, PAINFUL, ACHING, ITCHING, WAVERING AND SO ON. EVERY ACTION OR MOVEMENT MUST BE MINDFUL EVEN AT THE MOMENT OF EXCRETING AND URINING. WALKING, SITTING, STANDING, LYING, TAKING SOMETHING ETC. ESPECIALLY IN WALKING, IF YOU ARE WELL CONCENTRATED IN STEPPING, CARRY-ON LEAVING AND STEPPING DOWN AND THE LIFTING, LEAVING AND STEPPING DOWN SHOULD BE PRACTISED. ALL PERCEPTIONS SUCH AS SEEING, HEARING, SMELLING, TASTING, FEELING TANGIBLE THINGS AND THINKING SHOULD BE MINDFUL AT THAT VERY MOMENT. IT IS WHILE SOME KEEPER IF YOU PRACTISE CONTEMPLATION AND IT IS KĪESA (OBLIVIOUSNESS) IF YOU DON'T. THE MORE THOROUGH YOU PRACTISE, THE MORE CONCENTRATION YOU GAIN. YOU ARE ASSURED TO GAIN THE WISDOM OF RISING UP AND PASSING AWAY OF THE NĀMA RŪPA DHAMMA IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE LAW OF NATURE.

DHAMMA DĀNA
 U THAN HTAN - DAW AYE AYE HINYE
 KAN PVA FAMILY
 28, BETWEEN 24th AND 43rd STREET
 HUNDALAT

U VATHETHA
 (THI-TA-LONE SAYADAW)