

## The boundless tolerance of the Buddhists

Otto Ehlers (1901) , Chapter 4 “Burma”

The boundless tolerance of the Buddhists especially strikes a traveler coming from India and generally pleasantly moves him. One approaches the most holy spot without any hindrance, walks around among the praying people, one can see everything unpunished and also touch everything, while in the land of the Brahmins the breath of a European alone is often enough to desecrate a temple. The Buddhist is not a fanatic, every man is his friend, whether he is a Christian or a Jew, Hindu, fire worshipper or heathen. He believes in reincarnations and because nobody can choose in the cycle of existences what he will become he could, after his death, be born again, for example, as a European or Negro or as an ox, deer or any other kind of living creature. He has no God, his Buddha is nothing but a special human being, who, after an irreproachable life and after a myriad of existences, has reached the perfection that will lead to dissolution. To do as he did, to follow his example, to act in accordance with the rules that he has pronounced that is his religion. For him there is no Providence, no External life, and after the highest perfection which he can reach, after he has been reborn as a Buddha in his last existence, follows—nothingness.

The five main precepts of Buddha are:

1. You must no kill;
2. You must no steal;
3. You must no commit adultery;
4. You must not lie;
5. You must not take intoxicating beverages.



Mural paintings, Tempel at Ban Chiang, Udon Thani, by ThaiSunset Publications, 2013

While in other religions everybody, without shutting himself off from others, can reach deliverance by his pious deeds, for a Buddhist this goal can only be achieved when he completely stops out of the world and retreats into a monastery. Luckily most Buddhist people in Burma are not in a great hurry with this deliverance because if they would all together retreat to the monastery, there would be, since as monks they have to practice chastity among other things; no Burmese left at all within the shortest span of time. Furthermore, as long as there are only monks, there is nobody to give them alms and in accordance with the rules of the monastery they have to live of these only. Anyhow the number of *pungis* in Burma is legion and monasteries by the thousands can be found from one end of the country to the other, in the greatest cities as well as in the most remote villages. At every step, early in the morning, one meets *pungis* dressed in yellow in the style of the Roman toga. With uncovered heads, exposing their clean-shaven head to the scorching sunrays, under their arm a large yellow brass bowl, they walk from house to house to collect gifts. They do not thank for what they received but, on the contrary, they commit the donor to gratitude because they give him the opportunity to do good. To the prescribed gear of a *pungi* when he goes out of the monastery also belongs a large plan leaf fan, which he must hold before his face as soon as a female being comes within his circle of vision.



Congregation at the afternoon service at Ban Chiang Temple, Udon Thani Province.  
ThaiSunset Publications, February 2013.

I have often seen the fan in their hands but rarely the use I described and more than once, even inside the pagodas, I have met young *pungis* happily chatting with merry little ladies. According to the rules of the monastery the *pungi* must possess nothing which he does not owe to the generosity of fellow man and his dress must exclusively consist of yellow things which he has picked up along the road with great effort. He indeed follows the first rule but is not embarrassed in any way to

inform his supporters and friends about his needs and therefore we find in monasteries chairs, beds with mosquito nets, carpets, cigars, European canned foods, in short everything the heart of the *pungi* desires. He has even less regard for the rules when he obtains his clothes and he will not refuse a sparkling new robe of yellow cloth or silk. A small piece is then ripped off a corner and sewn back on again by which, in the opinion of the *pungi*, the precept has at least been followed in respect to the patchwork.

Life in the monastery is entertaining, not only for visitors but also for the *pungi* themselves. He has a few more or less annoying rules to follow, among others to take all his meal before noontime and to recite prayers at certain intervals but for the rest he can do what he likes. A greater part of the *pungis* is busy with educating of the male youth of their area and it is only due to these monastery schools that almost every Burmese is proficient in reading and writing. The beautiful sex grows up without ever touching the wells of knowledge. Like the *pungis* are limited to generous gifts they are also compelled to offer hospitality to everybody and thus the monasteries are used without much ado by almost all travelers as resting places, not only by the locals of the country but also by Europeans. Even the British troops are mostly quartered during their marches in the monasteries and therefore seldom take tents along. Where not enough room is available for all troops in the houses of the *pungis*, the rooms of the pagodas are not spared and on the march from Manipur to Burma I have seen many a rough warrior making himself comfortable between the Buddhist statues. The population did not seem to find this strange and said their prayers unconcerned around the armed intruders and their noisy doings. Travelers arriving daily, as well as other visitors, who appear to pass the time, provide sufficient change and entertainment for the monks. Blithe they sit among their guests, laughing, joking, smoking and chewing betel. If women were allowed to enter the monastery and *pungis* were allowed to drink beer, surely the life of a monk in Burma would leave nothing to be desired and could even please me. I should also remark that every monk is free, as soon as he is no longer keen on "joy without women," to lay down his yellow robe, leave the monastery and again return to public life. It is part of good behavior for the Burmese, at least once in their lives to have been a *pungi*, even if only for twenty-four hours. Therefore, as a rule, parents send their son, after he has reached his twelfth or fourteenth year, to the monastery for a short time. Before he adopts the yellow robe, the young aspiring monk is dressed in gold and silver brocade, adorned with family jewels or borrowed jewelry, and brought in a festive procession from house to house to receive gifts. Having arrived at the monastery, his hair is shaven, the monk's robe is put on and the next morning he walks through the village, like all other monks, to collect gifts and the day after that perhaps he is already back in the bosom of his family after the twenty-four hours of retreat from the world and self-abnegation. According to his age, his wisdom and virtue, the *pungi* who is really serious about a life of self-abnegation receives several ranks and the oldest monk of a monastery, the abbot, is very much honored by the entire population.

The cremation ceremony held after his death, at which always an incredible pomp is created, costs sometimes thousands of rupees. Until the sum that is necessary for holding such festivities has been brought together, the corpse of the *pungi* is kept in honey and provisionally placed on a catafalque-like framework nearby the monastery. When the necessary money has been brought together, which is often only the case after months or even years, a splendid, richly gilded pyramid-shaped wooden edifice, sometimes resting on a white elephant built from bamboo and paper ten times life size, the coffin is set up on the top floor. Then the whole splendid edifice is put to fire with the help of rockets.

Besides the monks' monasteries there are similar institutions for nuns but life in a convent does not appear to be very much loved in the world of Burmese women. I have only rarely met isolated self-abnegating women here and the few that crossed my path were without exception, so old an ugly that taking the oath of chastity cannot possibly have cost them any efforts. Their dress is the same

as of the *pungis* but white in color. Like them they live of alms of different kinds. Receiving money, gold, silver, and precious stones is prohibited to them by the rules of life in the convent as it is to *pungis*.



Young boys from the neighborhood preparing as 24-hour monks.  
Pak Thong Chai, Thailand. ThaiSunset Publications, ca. 2012

While the inhabitants of India possess no sense for the beauty of nature surrounding them, the Burmese often testify to great understanding of scenic beauty and they select for their dwellings, pagodas and monasteries mostly high points from which enjoy a pretty view.

So far I saw the most beautiful pagodas and *pungi kyaungs* in Mandalay. From the Mandalay Hill, which lies two kilometers from the palace and 550 feet above the city, one enjoys a splendid view of the city and the surrounding mountains with their countless pagodas and other delightful edifices, which are overloaded with gilding. In the northeast glimmers the mirror-smooth surface of the Nanda Lake; in the west flows the water of the Irrawaddy in pretty curves towards the lake. Green bouquets of trees rise picturesquely above the plain, now, after a long draught, covered with singed grass while mountains veiled in light blue vapor form the framework for all this.



“Sagaing Hills Pagodas,” Myanmar Tours Vietlong Travel  
[myanmartravelpackagetours.com](http://myanmartravelpackagetours.com)

Source: Otto E. Ehlers. 2002. “On Horseback through Indochina.” Volume 1. “Assam, Burma, and the Andamans and Nicobars.” Transl. by Walter E.J. Tips. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, pp. 77-81. Originally published as “An indischen Fürstenhöfen,” Vol. 2, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. 1901, Allgemeiner Verein für Deutsche Literatur, Berlin.