

BURMA

Literature, Historiography, Scholarship,
Language, Life, and Buddhism

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BURMA

Literature, Historiography, Scholarship,
Language, Life, and Buddhism

Hla Pe



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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FOREWORD

Professor Stuart Simmonds

Professor Hla Pe, when he retired from The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in 1979, could lay claim to being the longest-serving member of The Department of South East Asia and the Islands. Formally associated with the department since 1948 when he took up his duties as Lecturer in Burmese, he had worked closely with Professor J.A. Stewart and others in the preparation of the Burmese-English Dictionary since 1942. The dictionary was the centrepiece of his scholarly work, but he published widely in the fields of Burmese language and literature, and cultural studies.

Every scholar is known and remembered by his publications. This is certainly true of Hla Pe, but his friends may reflect that in them he has expressed only a part of himself. To say so does not in any way reduce the value of the works he has published but rather it is to highlight the good fortune that this volume has brought to notice an aspect of scholarship that often disappears forever as the sound of a speaker's syllables fade upon the air. This is the justification for the publishing of this book of lectures, edited by his friends. The ephemeral has been made permanent. Not that there is anything ephemeral, in another sense, about Hla Pe's lectures. The reader will soon see that they deal with important subjects with great seriousness of purpose and that they were structured with scholarly care. However, he will also discover that the informality of the lecture can provide a deeper insight into the nature of the man who delivered it. In this, Hla Pe has been particularly helpful because he tells us so much, so simply about his personal life, and relates it at every turn to the development of an academic career in a foreign land.

Now that he has returned to Burma in retirement it is important to know how his Buddhist beliefs came into being and matured to sustain him through the problems that everyone must face and brought him safely home again. From the same source is derived his attitudes to learning and to teaching. As he said, he inquired without shame or humiliation from all who could teach him. Then, in turn, he taught without pomposity or a sense of superiority; though that he did not say. He knew that the subject of study is greater and more permanent than the man or woman who professes it. In this knowledge he taught his students, created disciples to carry on his work, and advised the great number of men and women who came to him to seek his wisdom over their scholarly and human problems.

I believe also that Hla Pe had a more particular motive. He grew up in a colonial country, in an age of nationalism when young people desired urgently to make themselves aware of the values of their own society and culture. This was a prerequisite for the sense of national pride which had to be acquired by serious nationalists in order to sustain them in the struggle for independence. Hla Pe's scholarly endeavour was a dedication and its fruits, now that independence has long been achieved, remain of permanent value.

In the fourteenth lecture in this book, Hla Pe writes of a Burmese astrologer who predicted that he would become a great man or a monk. In the Buddhist context that is perhaps not a startlingly original prophesy. More moving to me was his insistence that he was inspired by the knowledge that his family supporters expected that he would become a man of consequence. That he was, and if confirmation is necessary then all his friends confirm it.

NOTE ON ROMANIZATION

John Okell

The problem of representing Burmese words and names in roman script has never had a single widely accepted solution. Different writers use different methods. The papers in this collection were written at different stages in Professor Hla Pe's career, and he used different systems of romanization at different times. For this edition, romanized Burmese words and names have been rewritten so as to conform with a single system, namely that entitled "Standard conventional transcription (with accented tones)" in John Okell's *A Guide to the Romanization of Burmese* (RAS and Luzac, 1971), pp. 66-67. Where the actual form of a word in Burmese script is important it has been romanized to match "standard transliteration" (p. 65 of the same booklet). Well-known names, such as Rangoon, Mandalay, Ava, and so forth, have been left in their traditional form.

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Robert H. Taylor, Chairman, Centre of South East Asian Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

When Professor Hla Pe retired from the Chair of Burmese in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, several of his colleagues in the Department of South East Asia and the Islands felt that it would be a great loss to students of Southeast Asia, and in particular students of Burma, if the body of his unpublished lectures and talks were to become lost. Therefore, my predecessor as Chairman of the Centre of South East Asian Studies, Mr P.A. Stott, encouraged the collection of the best and most important of the papers to be published in one volume. The initial selection was made by Professor Hla Pe's long-time colleague, Mr J.W.A. Okeil, who also standardized the system of transcription of Burmese into roman script. At this stage I requested two former members of the Indian Civil Service who had served in Burma and know Burmese to review the manuscript for us. The advice of Mr F.S.V. Donnison, CBE, and Mr W.I.J. Wallace, CMG, OBE, greatly assisted us in preparing the manuscript for publication. Professor H.L. Shorto also kindly reviewed the manuscript. Finally, we are very pleased, as we know Professor Hla Pe would be, that this volume is being published under the auspices of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.