



Message to the 'Save Shwedagon' Forum

from Dr Thant Myint-U, Founder and Chairman of YHT

Date: 17.May.2015

1. Before there was Yangon, there was the Shwedagon. Yangon was founded 260 years ago in the shadow of the great pagoda. It has always been the city of the Shwedagon. The Shwedagon is the centerpiece of Yangon; it is at the heart of Yangon's identity and character.
2. The Shwedagon is also the most important religious and cultural site in all of Myanmar. It is the most important Theravada Buddhist site and one of the most important heritage sites anywhere. It absolutely deserves to be recognized as a World Heritage Site. It is Myanmar's principal architectural and spiritual gift to the world.
3. The Shwedagon sits atop Singutara Hill. It is part of a very special geography. Singutara Hill may well have been home to cultural and religious sites and moments prior to the creation of the Shwedagon, reaching back to the earliest settlements more than twenty centuries ago. As we all know, the Pagoda first reached its present form and height in the 1400s during the reigns of Queen Shin Saw Bu and King Dhammazedi; much of what is today Yangon was part of the glebe lands of the Shwedagon.
4. When planning of the modern city was started in the 1850s, the Shwedagon and the area around the Shwedagon formed part of the Cantonment; the growth of the city was directed away from the Shwedagon to the south and southeast along the waterfront. After independence, the presence of government and army in the old Cantonment area prevented major development from taking place.
5. Yangon is today at an impasse. The old colonial-era plan of the city is no longer sufficient. Not having a new plan will be a disaster. Helter-skelter building will make Yangon an increasingly unattractive and unliveable city. With proper planning however, Yangon can become one of the most beautiful and liveable cities in Southeast Asia. The social, economic, and political benefits would be immense.
6. The Shwedagon must be the centerpiece of any plan for a 21st century Yangon, together with its waterfronts and heritage architecture. There is an urgent need for mass transit as well as enormous increases in office, retail and residential space – but these things must be planned in a way that recognizes the central significance of the Shwedagon to the spiritual and cultural life of millions of people.
7. This means, I believe, a special plan for the Shwedagon Pagoda area, that incorporates the pagoda complex itself as well as nearby monasteries and other religious buildings, takes special notice of other heritage sites in the immediate

vicinity, incorporates as well long-standing livelihoods and communities, protects low-income and vulnerable people, promotes sustainable tourism, but at its core makes the religious veneration of the Shwedagon – including through views of the Shwedagon from a distance and from easy access to the Shwedagon on foot and public transport. The Shwedagon area deserves a world-class plan.

8. The Yangon Heritage Trust is ready to assist in any way. I believe that a downtown conservation area and a specially protected area around the Shwedagon are both essential (but not the only) elements in what should be a dynamic and imaginative vision for a 21st century Yangon. I believe there can and should be medium and high-rise development – but in their proper place. There is more than enough room for the kind of growth and modernization we all want to. There is no conflict with development. On the contrary – it is unplanned growth that will ultimately hinder and make impossible the sustainable development of Yangon.

END