

## Magic Man

It is not that the mountains of Burma are more pointed than mountains elsewhere. If you were to look closely, you could see that nearly every one of them is crowned with a pagoda spire rising ever upwards. To the south of Mt. Popa, an eroded volcanic throat of prehistoric lava rises up 1,500 feet from the side of the main mountain. Pagodas have been built on the top of this throat to honour the "nats" or spirits which are said to reside there. Although it is a steep climb up the stairs to the top, pilgrims of all ages can be seen huffing and puffing their way up. There are many groups of monkeys who have staked out their own areas along the path. I had gone back to Burma specifically to fill an order for a very fine cut ruby which was being held for me. I also wanted to go back up to Pagan, the ancient capitol of Burma which is only about an hour drive from Mt. Popa. Pagan has been renowned for centuries for its lacquer ware, and one of my old friends, Maung Maung, has a small factory which produces some very fine examples. Maung Maung had just been released from prison after spending 2 years and 18 days behind bars for selling some very minor antique votive tablets made of clay to a tourist who had turned him in at the airport. Maung Maung still had that thick curling mustache but his head had been shaven nearly bare. He explained to me that he had begun a new life as a new man due to the influence of a magic man who lived on a mountain top near Mt. Popa. Maung Maung asked me if I would like to go visit this magic man who was a believer of Bo Min Hkang, the famous alchemist who, it is said, decided to burst into flames in front of many witnesses and completely disappear. There is a statue of Bo Min Hkang at the Shwe Dagon pagoda in Rangoon as he was last seen nearly 50 years ago with one leg crossed over the other, bending forward with his long hair flowing. As he was a heavy smoker, devotees are constantly putting lit cigarettes into the mouth of his statue. The road from Pagan wound around the base of Mt. Popa and ended abruptly at the base of another small mountain. Maung Maung and I walked the goat trail up the hills and came to the summit in less than one hour. Removing our shoes outside, we stepped into a room with about twenty people seated on the floor. This magic man apparently has the power of white magic to dispel black magic and purify the human soul. It is said that he attained his powers meditating under a particular tree and is in contact with the unseen world of spirits. I didn't believe any of it. The magic man has a wispy beard, unusual for a Burmese, and is unable to speak properly as he has an interpreter. I sat no more than three feet from him. He stood up at the open window looking outwards toward the sky and I was directly behind him. He put his arm out as if to catch a fly ball with his palm facing outwards and open as his hand circled the air. Out of the blue something flew into his hand. It came in an arc from the sky and was not tossed from below. He sat down and had me examine the gold colored circular disk with symbols raised up on the surface. He took it back from me and blew into his hands twice. As he opened them, I could see that the disk had changed into a small vase shape with a hole in the top. I returned it to him again and he rubbed it on his wrist turning the gold color into silver. Next, he took it in his hands and plunged his finger through the metal forming a ring which he slipped on my finger with a perfect fit. He said that wearing that ring would protect me from danger. I am wearing that ring now. Next, he picked up my black ray ban sunglasses from the table and broke them in two with a loud snap. Maung Maung laughed as my face fell. The magic man put both pieces into his hands and blew into them. My ray bans were restored. Was it real or an illusion? Was this magic man blessed with some supernatural power or was he just another charlatan? Two days after I returned to Bangkok, my ray bans broke into two pieces. It will be interesting when I return to Burma to find if he can again cement my shades together with the power of his mind.

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