

SHWE OO MIN MEDITATION CENTRE, MYANMAR

Address: Shwe Oo Min Dhamma Sukha Tawya,
Aung Myay Thar Yar Street,
Kon Tala Paung Village,
Mingaladon Township,
P.O. 11023, Yangon, Myanmar

How to get to the centre: Take a taxi!! You would have to walk quite a distance from the airport to the main road to catch a bus, plus you don't want to cram yourself and your luggage into one of the totally overcrowded Myanmar buses. The taxi fare should be no more than 7 - 10 US\$. Tell the taxi driver you want to go to: **Shwe Oo Min (Dhamma Sukha Tawya Yeiktha) opposite the London cigarette factory along Highway No.3**. Most of the taxi drivers at the airport know this centre. If you are in town too, this description would get you here. Just make sure they are NOT taking you to the old centre in North Okkalapa. It takes about half an hour from the airport and about one hour from downtown Yangon to get to our centre.

Email address: shweoomindsk@myanmar.com.mm Please tell your family and friends that this email address **cannot** be used to send or receive personal messages - except for very urgent and very important matters only!! We check our account two or three times a week.

Telephone: In an emergency they should phone **0095 - 1 - 638 170**, and ask for you in slow and clear English, hang up again and then ring a second time about 10 - 15 minutes later. By that time we should have found you - unless you went off into town.

Method: Mindfulness meditation according to the Satipatthana Sutta. The time table is exactly like at most other centres: getting up at 3.30 am, arrive in the shrine room at 4 a.m., two breaks for meals, and apart from that it is one hour sitting, one hour walking, one hour sitting, one hour walking until 9 p.m. when the Dhamma Hall gets locked. We aim to practise mindfulness continuously, from the moment we get up till we go to sleep. The approach we teach at Shwe Oo Min will enable you to practise in daily life!! This is a sort of training camp. You are expected to keep the traditional Eight Precepts, but exceptions (food) can be made for health reasons.

Teacher: Sayadaw U Tejaniya

Dhamma talks: Dhamma talks are in Myanmar only. You will be given our two publications, *DON'T LOOK DOWN ON THE DEFILEMENTS, THEY WILL LAUGH AT YOU*, and *THE PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS WILL CHANGE*

YOU plus MP3 CDs with recorded Dhamma Discussions. You need to bring an MP3 CD player if you want to listen to them here.

Dhamma Discussions: The teacher will give you initial instructions after your arrival. Then you will be able to meet up with him every fourth day for a Dhamma Discussion - together with a number of other yogis. Additional meetings can be arranged should you have difficulties in your practice.

Long-term stay: It is best to get a meditation visa in your country of residence. You will need a sponsor letter from us. Bear in mind that a letter can take anything between 2 - 4 weeks to reach you from Myanmar. When you get your visa from the embassy make sure it says MEDITATION - either on the visa sticker itself or next to it! Our centre will assist you to extend meditation visas for up to 6 months at a time. Extensions up to three months currently cost about US\$ 40, extensions for more than 3 months about US\$ 100. There is also a service charge of about US\$ 10 per extension. It used to be possible to change entry and tourist visas into meditation visas but currently this cannot be done. For a stay up to 28 days a tourist visa is sufficient. Overstaying a visa costs you US\$ 3 per day. They make no fuss about this at the airport; in fact they seem to be happy about getting the extra dollars.

Temporary Ordination: Is possible for both men and women. We advise you to give it some careful consideration and ask (ex-) monks or nuns about their experience before you decide to have your head shaven. You may also want to discuss it first with the teacher and the abbot.

Accommodation: Double rooms in double-storey buildings. There is accommodation for well over 200 people. During the busy season (November through January) you will probably have to share, at other times you are likely to have a room to yourself. Women are much more likely to have to share than men, but you might be lucky to get into the women's building with attached bathrooms (but then sharing rooms is almost a must in this building). All other buildings have shared facilities. You cannot make any room reservations. The abbot will allocate you a room on your arrival. Special arrangements can only be made for people with a physical handicap. The centre provides mosquito nets, mattresses, pillows, blankets, and all bed linen. You need to bring your own towel though. It is also a good idea to bring a torch (flashlight) since often there is no electricity after 9.30 p.m.

Food: There are two meals a day. The first one after dawn, around 5.30 - 6 a.m., the second at 10.30 a.m. Monks get served separately, nuns and lay people queue up and help themselves buffet style. There is a separate line for vegetarians. We do not cater for people on special diets. If you are worried about losing weight you might want to bring some extra protein. At breakfast you can have plain Chinese tea and milk tea, sometimes coffee, at lunch time Chinese

tea only. There is usually some kind of juice or lemonade served at 4 p.m., just outside the Meditation Hall.

Water: Drinking water gets pumped through several filters, including a UV filter, and is then distributed throughout the centre. If you are still worried about drinking it, we advise you to drink boiled water only. Boiled water is available during mealtimes, just bring a thermos and it will be filled up. Usually there are thermos bottles available at the centre. If not, you can ask the office to buy one for you. A 2 litre flask costs about US\$ 4. Instant coffee, tea, and chocolate drinks can be bought at Myanmar shops.

Costs: All our facilities, teachings, CDs, and publications are free of charge. You can offer a meal and make other donations if you wish.

When to come: The teacher is usually away from mid April until the end of July. He is occasionally away at other times. August through October is wet (rainy season), November, December, and January are the most pleasant months: nice and cool at night, warm and sunny during the day. These are also the busiest months, i.e. when the centre is most crowded, and you are most likely to have to share rooms. February is still pleasant but definitely warmer, in March the temperatures steadily rise, April gets very hot, and usually in the second half of May the rainy season starts again.

Clothes: Bring loose, not too brightly coloured clothes. Trousers and skirts must at least cover your knees, blouses and shirts with short sleeves are ok. Long-term women yogis might want to blend in with the locals and wear white blouses and dark brown lunghis. Both can be bought at the centre and if you are not Asian sized you can have them tailor made. Myanmar men usually wear lunghis and white shirts but they are not so strict about dress code. Best to bring your own T-shirts and buy the lunghis locally. If you have just been to Thailand and already got your sets of white clothes, wear those here. Bring a shawl/light sweater or a summer jacket for the cool winter mornings and - if you get cold easily - bring a woollen hat and a pair of socks.

If you stop over in Bangkok before coming to Myanmar you might consider buying a whole set or two of new clothes there. You can get good quality clothing at a fraction of what you pay at home. If you have large feet, buy your sandals or flip-flops in Bangkok too! In Myanmar it is difficult to get anything larger than size 10 / 42.

Money: The most important item to bring with you is a supply of CRISP US\$100 notes. Also bring about \$20 in small notes (all CRISP), the taxi drivers will not have change. Tell your bank you are going to Myanmar, ask for crisp notes: no wrinkles, no writings, no stamps etc., and no serial Nos. starting with CB. Check each and every note and don't be shy to ask for a better one if there are any scribbles or stamps - they will most certainly make a fuss about that here, give

you a lower exchange rate, or not accept your money at all!! The exchange rate should not be less than 1000 kyat to the US\$.

F A Qs

Why are you telling us to bring US\$, what's wrong with Euros?

Euros are fine too, best bring larger notes, at least €50, since you get a better rate (and make sure they are crisp and clean too), but unfortunately the exchange rate for Euros (and for GB£) is quite bad compared to what you get in other countries. In Bangkok the € is currently about 30% higher than the US\$ but here you only get about 15% more.

Do I have to change money at the airport? No, that is no longer compulsory. You can change money at a counter there but the rate will be less than half of what you get in town. Just hop into a taxi, they take US\$. The taxi driver will know a place to change, your hotel will be able to help you, or you can arrange it after your arrival at our centre.

Can I use my credit or debit card? Only some of the bigger hotels and shops accept credit cards. They will charge you quite a large handling fee. You are very unlikely to be able to get cash with your credit or debit card at any of the banks in Yangon and again the rate will be less than half of what you get for US\$ cash in town. Currently, you cannot use traveller's cheques.

Do monastics have to pay visa fees too? Yes, both monks and nuns have to pay the same fees as lay people, except for some very rare cases. If you are a monk in your country of residence, and if your passport photo picture shows you as a monk, plus if you get a meditation visa in your country of residence you might not have to pay any fees. The decision is completely arbitrary and in the hands of the immigration office.

Can I practise in my room or do I have to go to the Meditation Hall?

The rules say that you have to practise in the hall but individual needs are taken into consideration, and you therefore need to discuss this with the teacher.

Do I need to bring my own meditation gear?

The centre supplies mosquito nets and sitting mats. There are usually a few small cushions available (left behind by yogis) but we do not have meditation cushions or stools. You might want to bring your own.

I find sitting on the floor very difficult, can I sit on a chair?

Yes, no problem, there are plenty of chairs available.

Can I go on trips into town during my stay? Yes, you can, but you need permission from the abbot every time you leave the centre. You need to tell him the reason why you want to go out and how long you will be gone. When you return you will have to report in.

Can I buy my extra protein supply in Yangon?

Yes, you can easily get all sorts of nuts and seeds at the supermarkets. They also sell protein powder, milk powder, oats, muesli, corn flakes, ovaltine, Swiss chocolate, etc. You will not be able to get organic protein bars and other health foods though.

What about malaria? There is no malaria in the Yangon area at all, so there is absolutely no need to take any prophylaxis here. There are still some areas in Myanmar where there is Malaria though. But we do have mosquitoes at the centre. Bring mosquitoes repellent!

Can I bring my mobile phone? Yes, no problem, you can use it as an alarm clock here - gives you the choice what melody you want to wake up to. Unfortunately though (or fortunately, depending on viewpoints), you can neither make phone calls nor send sms text messages since Myanmar has no roaming contracts with any other country. A local sim card will cost you around US\$1500 (sic!) plus monthly fees, plus calls.

Can I make phone calls from the centre? Yes, you can. Calls to Europe are around US\$4, to the US and Canada around US\$5 per minute. Payable in cash US dollars!

Can I access my email account from a Myanmar internet café? Yes, there are a growing number of internet cafés in Yangon and other towns. They charge between 40 - 80 US cents per hour, payable in kyat, the local currency.

Can I receive parcels from home at the centre? No, you have to go and pick them up in town. You only get a note from customs saying that there is a parcel for you. With that note, your passport and some kyat you then go to their office and ask for your parcel. The trip to the office takes about one hour by taxi, up to three hours by bus. They will open it up in front of you and go through it very carefully. You will have to pay import duty on certain items and if there is a book or any other publication in the parcel you will have to take it to the censorship bureau. Once everything is done you are asked to pay a small fee, and only then are you handed over a receipt and your parcel. Since this whole procedure will cost you quite a bit of money and time, we recommend not to have anything sent to Myanmar unless it is absolutely essential.

Do I need an onward ticket? No, you can arrive in Myanmar on a one-way ticket. There are a number of travel agents in Yangon who can sell you tickets to just about anywhere. Prices are slightly higher or the same as in Bangkok.

Which is the best way to fly to Myanmar? From Europe there is one company that offers direct flights Vienna - Yangon from October till February. That might be interesting only if there is a budget airline flying from your town to Vienna. Otherwise you will have to change planes in at least either Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, or Bangkok. Singapore Airlines tends to have the cheapest tickets from a number of European cities. You will have to wait several hours at Singapore's fantastic airport and then it is another 2¹/₂ hour flight to Yangon. You could do yourself a favour and take advantage of one of their stopover deals in order to recover from jet lag in Singapore.

There are lots of cheap deals to be had from both Europe and America to Bangkok. Shop around and book well in advance. Bangkok also has the cheapest flights to Yangon. Plan at least 3 working days in Bangkok if you need to arrange your visa, your plane ticket, and recover from jet lag. Currently the cheapest flights Bangkok - Yangon are with Air Asia. This is Asia's fast expanding budget airline and must be booked online. If you book in advance and/or are flexible when you fly, you can get tickets Bangkok - Yangon for as little as US\$ 65, including the 700 Baht airport tax, and Yangon - Bangkok for US\$ 45 excluding the US \$10 airport tax. The flight is just over an hour. The only drawback is that you can check in no more than 15 kg, and hand luggage is restricted to 7 kg. Excess weight charges are hefty and if you have a lot of luggage you might be better off with Bangkok Airways.

All the above information was compiled in June 2007. Any corrections or updates welcome!

First update end of June 2007: Long-Term Stay section - visa extension rules