

# The Philosopher's Plastic Stone

**KETEP's** "The Philosopher's Plastic Stone" was adapted from the Burmese folktale "Why There Are so Many Pagodas at Pagan," in *Burmese Folktales* by Maung Htin Aung, (Oxford UP, 1959). The problem of plastic bags defacing the landscape, clogging drains and irrigation channels is just beginning in Myanmar, but Yangon and Mandalay warehouses are filled with cheap Chinese disposable plastic items and short lasting plastic toys. The 2012 political and economic opening of Myanmar is releasing a flood of plastic objects....and rubbish.

The **KETEP** participants were professional dancers and puppeteers, students from Chin state, journalists, a video maker, and an engineer. It was performed at the iUi#2.5 International Festival of Contemporary Theatre & Performance organized by The Theatre of the Disturbed and The French Institute in Yangon, where the week before Daw Aung San Suu Kyi had appeared. Thus when the play's Taxpayers stand up among the audience members to complain about the government, spectators applauded, as they did for many of the Monk's satirical asides. The story is not only well-known but a statue of Monk Goat-Bull with his outrageous eyes is in the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon.

## Summary:

The original story involves a Monk cum astrologer/chemist (aka *zawgyi* in Myanmar) who depletes the King's treasury in his search for the Philosopher's Stone that will turn base metals into gold. To punish himself, he puts out his eyes (a la Oedipus) and tosses the stone into the latrine that his Assistant later discovers is on fire. To see what has occurred, he tells his Assistant to buy some animal eyes in the market but the Assistant can only find one bull's eye and one goat's eye, so the monk becomes known as Monk Goat-Bull. After he turned all the pots in Pagan into gold, the people became rich and built many temples. The Monk retires to the holy Mt Popa, but his Assistant proves inadequate to follow him and is content with a present of a piece of gold every day in perpetuity.

The **KETEP** version combines the Burmese folktale with the Greek myth of King Midas who suffers when he gets his wish to turn everything he touches to gold, but instead of gold, all objects are turned into plastic. At first the King and all the people are pleased with the Monk's new convenient, cheap, light material, but when everything the stone touches turns to plastic—the King's food, the Princess and the Assistant—Monk Goat-Bull becomes a victim of his own success. The Prince disguises himself as an iconic old man Shwe Yoe to ask people what they think of the plastic now and hears only complaints, and although the Monk cannot eliminate the plastic already in use, he again throws away the magic stone and refuses to make more.

For the production, the Monk was dressed in the red tunic and cap of the *zawgyi*. In Burmese comic performance *anyaint pwe*, the comedians indulge in slapstick, bopping each other over the head with a thin metal plate that makes a loud noise on impact. The Taxpayers hit the Monk with their plastic objects in the same fashion.

## Cast:

Monk Goat-bull  
Assistant  
Taxpayer 1  
Taxpayer 2  
Taxpayer 3  
King  
Prince  
Princess

# The Philosopher's Plastic Stone

## Act I

(*outside Monk's laboratory, scattered in the audience*)

Tax 1 (*shouts toward the stage*) No more of our money.

Tax 2 For seven years he's been wasting it.

Tax 3 We pay and pay and yet still the royal treasury is empty.

Tax 1 That's because he is a *special* alchemist—he turns our gold into nothing.

Tax 3 Even the king is getting fed up.

Tax 2 Listen to no more of his promises. Throw him out. (*they chant 'Throw him out'*)

Monk (*inside his laboratory on stage*) Fools. I've studied the old manuscripts and followed every instruction perfectly. I must persuade the King to give me one last bit of cash to finish. (*goes to the King on throne*)

Monk (*in the Palace*) Your Majesty, you have faithfully supported me all these years. Now I have reached the final stage and success is in sight. Do not forsake me now.

King I've emptied the royal treasury for you and now the people are angry. I have nothing more to give.

Monk Sir, that ring there on your finger...?

King My dead wife's ring! I can't part with it.

Monk My last request!

King (*gives him the ring*) My last jewel. You know now what will happen if you are not successful.

Monk I will be. I have to be. (*goes back home*) Now read me the last instructions again.

Asst "Put the lump of metal in acid, and it will at last be The Philosopher's Stone."

Monk Are you sure it says '*acid*?' Does it say for how long?

Asst Yes....and no.

Monk (*They put it in the acid and smoke comes out.*) Anything?

Asst No. (*They wait, growing sound of angry people outside.*)

Monk Look again.

Asst No. (*They wait, the sound of angry people gets louder.*)

Monk Let me look! Damn! Nothing's happening. I can't fail. (*He goes to the people; they shake their fists, and he runs back in.*) They'll tear me apart. I should have worked on becoming invisible.

Tax 1 There he is! The fraud has been cheating the king.

Tax 2 He doesn't fool us. He's taken our money and put it in a foreign bank account.

Tax 3 But he won't escape. We're coming in, you fraud, and getting our money back.

Monk My fellow citizens, I have deprived myself of food and sleep....

Asst And me, too.

Monk Working my fingers to the bone....

Asst Mine, too.

Monk Following the ancient words to make our country the richest on earth....

Asst And me, too.

Monk Just be patient a little bit longer.

Asst And you, too. (*Monk hits him*)

Monk Take another look, fool. Any change?

Asst (*He shakes his head*) You've failed.

Monk And you, too. (*He hits him*) I have to report to the King. (*He goes to Palace.*)

King (*in Palace, King sees him and turns away*) Don't tell me.

Monk It's a worst case scenario.

Tax 2 We demand immediate execution.

Tax 3 We demand immediate repayment.

Tax 1 We demand a new king who won't be so easily fooled by imposters.

Tax 3 Or so greedy.

King Alas, my people, I did it to make us all prosperous.

Tax 1 But the Philosopher's Stone is a fairy tale. No one believes it anymore. The road to prosperity is not magic but proper planning and hard work. You fooled yourself but not us. You must punish him, and step down.

King Yes, I must, I must, I must. (*to himself*) But what can I do?

Monk *(to himself)* It's my fault. I've put the king in this position. All right you people, look and never forget. *(He turns his back and puts out his eyes.)* Are you satisfied?

Tax *(all gasp)* Yes, yes We won't demand any more.

Monk Where's my assistant now that I really need him? *(grabs him)* Let's go home. Throw that lump of shit into the latrine where it belongs. And let's go to sleep.

Asst *(He throws lump in a hole)* May my shit turn to gold! *(He drinks, sound of owl or night bird; Asst is drunk, gets up at night and goes to use the latrine. He sees light from hole and jumps back)* Master, master, the latrine is on fire.

Monk What! What, I can't see a thing. Run to the market and buy a pair of animal eyes.

Asst Here. I could only get one eye from a bull and one eye from a goat.

Monk What a ridiculous fate! Now I will be known as 'Monk Goat Bull.' Give me the stone. Wash it. *(He puts in the eyes, touches them with the stone and he can see. Then he hits his asst.)* You must have read the instructions wrong. Hmm, it says 'acid' but it must have meant 'pee.'

Asst That makes sense. *(Monk hits him)* It doesn't look like gold.

Monk No, of course not. It makes gold, not is gold.

Asst It doesn't even look like a stone any more.

Monk You're right, but it must be magic because it cured my eyes. Let's go to the king.

Monk *(in the Palace)* Your Majesty, look, the stone cured my eyes.

King Indeed. But they are very strange. Can you really see?

Monk Yes, perfectly. Tell the people to bring out their pots, clay or metal and baskets. The stone will turn all into gold.

King Excellent. I knew you wouldn't fail.

Monk *(Taxpayers each bring a pot)* Now, you people of little faith, be silent and behold. Your Majesty, I saved your ring—now it will become the purest of gold. *(Everything turns into plastic)*

Tax 1 Hey, it's not gold! Now you've ruined my pot. *(She hits monk with plastic pot)*

Tax 2 What have you done with my basket? *(She hits monk with plastic basin)*

Tax 3 You're not just a fraud, but the most shameless fraud we've ever seen. *(She hits him.)*

Monk My assistant is playing a trick on me. *(He hits assistant who turns to plastic.)*

King You completely disappoint me. Don't ever come back again. (*He throws his plastic ring to the ground and goes. Monk picks it up*)

Monk I don't understand. What is this? The King's ring, but it's lighter. It looks like glass, but doesn't break. It must be worth something. Hey you, come along. (*goes to Assistant*) What! You don't move? A statue. But so light. (*He carries him off stage*) This is some kind of miracle, too bad I don't know what kind. Ah stone, I'm not enough of a philosopher for you!

## Act II

Tax 1 (*returns to laboratory*) Master Monk Goat-Bull. I didn't throw my pot away, but filled it with water and carried it home. It holds water well and is much lighter than the old pot.

Tax 2 And it keeps water out too. The river flooded my house and I was able to float inside my wash basin. We want you to touch other things.

Monk Really?

Tax 1 This old coat. (*He touches it with the stone*) See, now it is a water-proof raincoat. Now these sacks. (*they turn into plastic bags*). Excellent, now I can buy soup and drinks without messy dripping. Now do my washing basin, too. And everything else. (*They give him many items and all are turned into plastic*)

Monk It's not gold.

Tax 3 It's not as pretty but more useful. Now I don't have to spend my time weaving baskets from reeds, making pots and bowls from clay or packing food in banana leaves. This new stuff is more clean and convenient. I want it for everything.

Monk And cheap too, as long as I don't charge for touching with my stone.

Tax 1 Well, everyone has to live. Here's a 500 kyats for your help.

Monk Keep it. (*He finally accepts the money*) Tell everyone to come, I will touch everything. (*taxpayers hurry away*) Oh, what pretty flowers. (*He picks flowers*) Ouch! What? They've changed. They still look like flowers, but don't smell, don't feel the same. Perhaps they won't die either! Why, this is wonderful stuff—it'll last forever. I've found the secret to eternal life, and eternal youth. Oh blessed stone, you are better than gold!. (*He kisses stone*) I will touch everything! Flowers that don't need water and stay in bloom. Bring all your things—I will touch all. (*People line up with lots of things*)

King Yes, yes, make everything into this marvelous material—it will last forever.

## Act III

Monk (*He's now wearing a minister's hat*) Your Majesty, everyone is happy with the new material.

King Not everybody. Some are grumbling about being out of work—those who used to make clay pots, and reed baskets. Your magic has replaced everything.

Monk Yes, but they are just oldfashioned and need to adapt to the new world. How do like your new throne room? It gleams like gold, and yet cost nearly nothing from the royal treasury. And your new royal barge; it floats wonderfully.

King Yes, even my crown sits more lightly on my head and doesn't give me headaches like before. It's all nice, but you know, not quite the same. I have a hard time appreciating it—it seems somehow...fake. I guess I'll get used to it...but I don't like seeing my fruit wrapped in it. You may go. (*monk exits*) Prince!

Prince (*enters*) Yes, father.

King Disguise yourself and go around the country. Use your eyes and ears to find out what people feel about this new material. Oh! We can't keep calling it 'new material.' We've been using it for 10 years. Doesn't it have a proper name?

Prince It's been analyzed as polyurethane..., but the common people call it 'plastic.'

King I want to know if they are still as in love with it as before.

Prince They love it more and more. They use plastic for everything, replacing wood, metal, glass as well as clay. The Monk can't keep up with the demand, so the Chinese are selling it too.

King Go investigate. Every good thing has a dark side.

Tax 2 (*Prince visits puppet towns and farms*) All this plastic rubbish in my fields, it clogs up my drainage system and my rice rots.

Tax 3 All this plastic rubbish in the rivers and ocean. It gets caught in my net, it clogs up my motor. The birds and sea animals think it is food and eat it and it clogs up their stomachs and they die....

Tax 1 All this plastic rubbish clogs the drains in the cities and the streets flood.

Prince (*disguised as Monk*) Don't complain! Just collect it and burn it!

Tax 2 (*coughs*) Burn it and the smoke poisons the air—perhaps it is returning to shit. We can't breathe. The smoke causes cancer.

Tax 1 The water that sits in it tastes strange too. I don't like it—what do you think? (*gives to Prince to drink*)

Tax 2 When the sun warms it, it poisons the water.

Prince If you don't want to burn it, you can bury it.

Tax 3 We do bury it, but it lasts forever. It's become a mountain higher than Mt. Popa.

Prince You can dump it at sea.

Tax 2 We dump it at sea, but now there is a plastic island the size of Texas in the middle of the ocean. It will last forever.

Prince You can export it to another country. (shown paying ministers to dump)

Tax *(all together)* But other countries are exporting their plastic rubbish to us!

Prince You can use it less.

Tax *(all together)* No, no, no! It is much too cheap and convenient! *(everything is wrapped in plastic.)*

## Act IV

Monk Your Majesty, last night I had a wondrous dream, a plan to restore the temples in Pagan.

King Yes?

Monk With my new plastic. It can be made into any shape. We can make a clay mold of the ruined sections, and pour in the hot liquid plastic, and when it cools, break the mold and fit it into place. A little plaster over the surface will hide the cracks and can be painted. No one will know what is inside. It will last forever, even in an earthquake it won't break, just bounce.

King I don't know. Before I can do anything now, I have to consult with UNESCO.

Prince I have come back to report. The people seem addicted to plastic—they use it for everything. Most of them feel that they now cannot live without it.

Monk See, Your Majesty, more valuable than gold!

Prince Yes, but they complain about the new problem of plastic rubbish everywhere, especially bags, plastic wrapping of food, and plastic bottles. More and more plastic rubbish. It is causing problems in the countryside and the towns, in the rivers and seaside. We've never had this problem before so we are at a loss at how to solve it.

King Monk Goat Bull must solve it. He created it. Go back to your books.

Monk I don't need my books to solve it. I know how---by being king.

King How do you dare?

Monk Easily. *(grabs the crown)*

Prince No, you won't. *(He rushes to Monk with his sword out)*

Monk *(laughs)* Ha! I am not afraid of your sword! I am not afraid of anything. *(He touches sword with stone and it turns to plastic. It is already a plastic toy sword.)*

Prince *(strikes Monk who laughs)* You see, you can't hurt me. Now, give me your throne. *(He takes crown and sits)* I allow you and the Prince to go to your country palace and live in peace, but the Princess must stay and be my wife.

King No, never. She will never agree.

Monk She already has.

Prince Father, she has bargained to save your life! Let's go now and plot our return. (*exit*)

Monk Plastic, my god! I will replace all the gold sculptures with plastic ones. The royal treasury will be filled again. Princess!

Princess What are you doing on the throne? Where are my father and brother?

Monk I am now your king and husband. First kneel and then embrace me.

Princess No, never. (*she runs*) Father! Help! (*Monk catches her and she turns into plastic*)

Monk No! Oh, drat! Now she's a plastic statue too. That was a bad mistake. Now what to do? Bring me some food.

Monk (*He tries to eat; everything turns to plastic*) Drat! plastic smells and tastes horrible. If this keeps up, I'll starve to death. The only person who ever had a good idea was my Assistant. I wonder if there is any way to bring him back to life. (*he drags him back on stage*) Well, Mr. Know-it-all, you should have warned me. What to do? What to do? What started it all? The Philosopher's Stone, of course. There, I offer it to you. It is yours. (*he puts stone in front of assistant. Nothing happens*) Not enough. Is that where it really started? No, it started with my greed and quest for power. People have always craved gold, but I replaced it with a craving for convenience! But once accustomed with convenience people won't go back to more troublesome items. Here, is the king's ring. I give up all greed and quest for power. Now I am just a poor Monk again. (*picks up his staff*) I am sorry I made you into plastic, you silly boy. Perhaps I should throw *you* in the latrine and see what happens. (*Assistant suddenly twitches*)

Asst No, no Master, don't!

Monk You're alive! (*rushes to embrace him, then stops cautiously.*) Well, the celebration can wait. We're in a pickle. Plastic solved a few problems but created many more. How to break the addiction? You're the smart ass—you figure it out.

Asst It was easier being a plastic man. My mother always told me when I had to make a difficult decision to make a list—put all the benefits on one side and all the deficits on the other. So, let's make a list with all the good plastic things on one side and the bad on the other.

Monk (*they make a list, and get the audience to make suggestions*) I think I see a pattern.

Asst Yes, the durable good made from plastic can be used for a long time, but they are difficult to dispose of. The use-once-and-throw-away plastic creates the immediate problem of filling every place with toxic rubbish. So, I think we need two solutions.

Monk I suggest we meditate on top of Mt Popa. Let's go. (*on Mt. Popa, he digs up roots and makes them into medicine balls, he eats 3 and gives 3 to Asst.*)

Asst (*disgusted*) I can't eat these.

Monk You must. They will give us the power to meditate.



Asst They look too much like human flesh. I can't eat them.

Monk Very well. Meditate without them. But we must summon all our strength, wisdom and faith to solve this problem. (*they meditate, Asst falls asleep and snores*) See, I knew he needed to eat the medicine balls. Wake up! Well, did you come up with a solution?

Asst Actually, yes. I had a dream that told me we need to use less plastic.

Monk You nincompoop! That's no prophecy. Glass and clay are heavy and break; metal is expensive, and wood requires cutting down too many trees, plastic is the best answer and has already replaced all of them.

Asst No, we can find something better to replace plastic, bamboo for example, is being used instead of plastic, and even wood. Bamboo grows fast and causes no harm to the environment. Bamboo furniture and floors, even computer casing, bamboo fiber clothes...

Monk Not bad, I came to a similar conclusion. Bioplastics for disposable plastic as well. Disposable packaging can be made from compressed rice and corn husks. You can use once and throw away, but it will disappear into the earth and not make mounds of toxic rubbish. Biodegradable substitutes are available, we just need to put them into the market. We have to learn from Nature. In Nature there is no waste, everything is used by somebody and reused by somebody else. The most wonderfully efficient system. I wonder if the King can make a law against waste.

Asst (*shakes his head*) People will complain. The alternatives are too expensive. People are accustomed to plastic being cheap or free because you just make it from your stone.

Monk We still have to support it. I know! We'll tax the plastic and use the money to subsidize the non-plastic. Plastic seems like magic but isn't. It's made from oil and makes us need more and more oil. We have to begin to 'unplastic' our plastic world.

Asst Now, to the really big problem.

Monk What is that?!

Asst How are you going to "unplastic" the princess?

Monk Hmmm difficult. How did I unplastic you?

Asst With an apology.

Monk Maybe I'll try a kiss with her. My poor princess, this won't hurt a bit. (*kisses her and turns into frog*)

Princess Yuck! (*wipes her mouth*) Don't touch me, you frog.

Asst And so the Monk hopped up to Mt. Popa where he meditates as a frog till his next incarnation. The moral of the story is: Don't let plastic reincarnate into rubbish. Refuse plastic. Reduce your use of plastic. Reuse every plastic item till the bitter end. And then Recycle it. The 4 'r's—refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle. (puppet chants 4 R's as a mantra) Whoops! He dropped his stone. We'll put it here on a pedestal to remember that everything that seems to be too good to be true usually is. **THE END**