

RESPECT TO THE ELDERS



For the past two years we went to Thaleba to offer things for the young generation living in this rural village. This year's trip was done with the intention to make offerings to the elders living in Thaleba.

In Burma and many other countries, it is custom that the children take care of their ageing parents. In these countries, social institutions like old folk's homes are not widely established; ageing parents usually stay with their children. In present day Burma, this is still the common practice. Very often when I speak to Burmese people, they tell me that besides caring for their own family they also have to care for their mother, father, mother-in-law, or father-in-law. When they talk about their ageing parents and the care they need, it is not done with frustration or bitterness about an imposed, cultural duty. On the contrary, they have much respect and gratitude for their parents in particular and elder people in general.

The following two examples are typical for the way a Burmese family lives.

A few days ago, we hired a taxi in order to visit a couple of nunneries. The taxi driver told us that he needed to be back by 4 o'clock because he had to take his father-in-law to the hospital. The 82-year-old man suffers from diabetes and a stroke he had had sixteen years ago. Since then he is bound to his bed and the family has to feed him. Besides this, he also has problems with his heart. The old man's condition is deteriorating and it looks like they have to amputate his fingers. So, the taxi driver had to take him to the hospital to do the necessary tests and preparations for the surgery.



Grandfathers in Thaleba



Grandmothers in Thaleba

Another example of how the family takes care of elder people is Mimmi's grandmother. Mimmi's grandmother died five years ago at the age of ninety-six. The grandmother was living with some family members in a flat near the Yangon River. The flat had two bedrooms, a living room, a little room where the shrine was, a kitchen, and a toilet. Besides the grandmother there were one son (single), one daughter (single), and another daughter with her husband and two children.

These six people looked after and cared for the grandmother until she passed away.

On my many trips throughout Burma I have seen and visited only a few old folks' homes. In many cases, they were established by a monastery. One such an institution is in Mingun, on the Irrawaddy River near Mandalay in Upper Burma. Mingun is famous for being the site of the biggest and heaviest bell in the world as well as for Mingun Sayadaw. He was a highly learned and respected monk; during the sixth Buddhist Council in Yangon (1954 – 1956) he answered all the questions in regard to the Buddhist scriptures. In about 1970, Mingun Sayadaw established this home for old people who did not have family members to care for them. Many years ago I visited this old folks' home. It happened to be on a Sunday morning and most of the old people had gathered at the open-air theatre. When we got there, a group of five grandmothers were standing on the stage and singing a well-known Burmese song. After that, a couple of grandfathers played a little comedy. It was obvious: the old people were enjoying this self-made entertainment which took place every Sunday morning.



Pagodas in Thaleba

Such old folks' homes are dependent on the support from the monastery (if they are affiliated to a monastery) and/or on the support of the public. Burmese people do not only offer support to monasteries or nunneries, they also offer support to institutions such as old folks' homes, orphanages, schools for the blind, or homes for children with HIV.

In the Buddhist teachings, we find several passages that mention the importance of having respect for the elders. For example in the Dhammapada, a collection of verses, we find this verse:

“For one who has the habit of paying homage and who always respects the elders, four things increase, namely, life span, beauty, happiness, and strength.”



Grandfather in Thaleba

In one of his discourses, the Buddha said that one could not repay one's parents, even if one were to carry them on one's shoulders for the rest of one's life. The parents do so much for their children for many years: they feed them, they wash and clean their bodies, they provide them with clothes, they send them to school, they impart their knowledge and understanding, they patiently listen to their problems and worries, they rejoice in their children's success, they care for them when they are sick, and they love their children dearly. The Buddha said that there was only one way to repay one's parents. If one could establish one's unbelieving parents in faith, virtue, generosity, and wisdom, then one would do enough to repay one's parents for what they have done.

Burmese culture is deeply rooted in the Buddhist teachings and so the respect and veneration for the elders is thoroughly embedded in the heart of Burmese people. To have a ceremony during which the elders are honoured and showed reverence is nothing unusual in Burma.

On January 27, we left for Thaleba in order to honour and pay respect to the elders. Our group consisted of Sayadaw and two monks (they are all from Thaleba), Dr. Tin Mar Thet (a doctor from Yangon who also wanted to contribute to this offering), Mee Thwet (a volunteer at CMMC, also from Thaleba), Mimmi (a volunteer at CMMC) and her parents Daw Kyin May and U Soe Myint, and Daw Virañani, Marjo, Ite, Alex, and myself (our group of five foreigners).



From left to right: Marjo, Daw Kyin May, Ven. Ariya Ñani, Mimmi, Ven. Vira Ñani, U Soe Myint, Ite, Dr. Tin Mar Thet, Alex

In the late afternoon, we crossed the Mu River on the bridge for which Marjo and Ite had contributed to the cost of its construction last year. This bridge not only connects the two villages of Thaleba and Kyaugone, but it also shortens the journey from Mandalay to Thaleba considerably. We continued to drive a bit further into Thaleba, before the car stopped.



The bridge connecting the villages of Thaleba and Kyaugone

The dirt road was lined with school children on both sides. We got out of the cars and started to walk toward the school – between the students who were reciting metta phrases. All of the six hundred and forty students were proudly wearing their uniforms – an offering they had received from us in the past two years. On the following day, I got a group of students together and took a picture of them wearing the uniforms.



The students welcoming our party



The students wearing their uniforms



Trays with some of the offerings

The preparations for this celebration started weeks before the actual offering. First of all they needed to make a list with all the people aged 75 and older. It turned out that there were 92 women and 58 men entitled to this dana. The offerings to these 150 old people included:

A blouse/shirt, a longyi, a bottle of vitamins, a towel, three kinds of Burmese medicines, a bag of washing detergent, a bag of rice, and 10'000 kyats (10 \$) for each person.

Most of the cash came from Dr. Tin Mar Thet and her boss, who is well-known for her respect and support for the elders. Sayadaw U Indaka offered the bags of rice to the grandmothers and grandfathers in his village.

In the morning of the celebration, all the offerings were piled up on tables at the front of the makeshift open-air hall. After about eight o'clock, the grandmothers and grandfathers, students and parents started to arrive. The old people were seated with due respect in front of the hall, behind them was the remaining audience.

As part of the celebration, the younger people paid respect to the grandmothers and grandfathers. The elders all turned around to face the hundreds of children and adults sitting behind them. Then they all bowed, and with their hands in añjali, chanted verses of metta and veneration.



Daw Kyin May (77 years) paying respect to Daw Hla Yee (85 years) and handing over the tray with the offerings

Again, this is a common practice in Burma. People do not only pay respect to monks and nuns, but they also show their respect to people that are older than them. For example, children pay respect to their parents, aunts and uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers. This is usually done in a formal way on the full moon day in September (in the Burmese month of Dawthalin). But it is also done on other occasions such as before going on a journey and spend a few days away from home.

After several speeches, our group handed the offerings to the grandmothers and grandfathers. I felt so happy and delighted to see how many of these old women and men accepted the gifts with great dignity and joy. On the other hand, it saddened my heart to see how some of these old women and men were only able to walk with great difficulty or the help of another person. Once again, it brought to light the fact that we all share the same condition: we are getting older day by day and we are subject to getting weaker and sick. The fact that we all will die one day was not directly present on that day of celebration. But I asked myself how many of these old people would be no longer alive the following year.

An additional offering to the elders in Thaleba was the establishing of a health fund for the neediest of the elder in the village. Among these 150 old people there are 36 old women and men who live in such poor conditions that they could never afford a visit to a doctor and pay for the medication, let alone to go to a hospital. A committee of eight people from Thaleba, including monks and lay people, will administer the fund, discussing each individual case before handing out the money for all the medical care the person needs.

On top of that, the health fund will also pay for the injections needed to treat snake bites. Every year, ten to twenty people from Thaleba get bitten by snakes, especially by Russell's vipers. Without an injection of anti-venom, people usually die from viper bites.

Last year Marianne offered money to the local medical clinic with the specification that it should be used to treat snake bites or other emergencies. The local doctor, Dr. Min Lwin, told us that in the past year he could save the life of seven people with that donation. One of these people was an



Daw Shwe who was bitten by a viper

elderly lady called Daw Shwe. When she stepped on a snake, it bit her in the foot. Other people were luckily present and immediately took her to the doctor. One person killed the snake with a stick. Dr. Min Lwin had no difficulty to identify the snake: it was a Russell's viper. Daw Shwe was scared to death, she thought that she had to die. Her blood pressure went up to 180. After she got the anti-venom injection she started to calm down and on the following morning she was feeling well and healthy. Twenty days after that frightening incident she went to the nearby meditation centre in Sadaung to participate in a meditation retreat.



The mother and her two surviving children

In another case, Dr. Min Lwin saved the life of a mother and her two children, but he could not prevent the death of her third child. The mother and her three children had an oral infection; Dr. Min Lwin said that it was something like cholera. This family is incredibly poor, having only a little bamboo shack to live in. The mother sells water-cress to make a living; the father is an alcoholic, not caring for his wife and children. When the four of them got sick, the mother still had to go out and sell water-cress. She had no other choice than leaving the children alone at home. When she got back, one of her children had died. It was only with the death of the child that Dr. Min Lwin came to know about their critical health condition. For the next twenty-four hours he treated and supervised them every hour – and they survived. Because they are so poor the doctor's wife gave them each a longyi and some basic food-stuffs.

Through Dr. Min Lwin we learned that there are about thirty extremely poor families living in Thaleba. They have barely enough to live and never could afford a visit to a doctor. We decided to give an extra amount of money to Dr. Min Lwin. With this money, he can treat these people for free and on top of that he will be able to give them food or clothes according to their most pressing needs.

After the "Respect to the Elders Ceremony" we offered a meal to everybody. Young and old liked the mohinga, a traditional Burmese dish, because it is something that people in Thaleba do not get very often. Out in the countryside it is not so easy to get the fermented rice noodles that are then eaten with a soup



Kids enjoying the mohinga

usually made with fish. Some of the kids had two or even three bowls of mohinga.

In the afternoon, we had time to visit people in the two villages of Thaleba and Kyaugone. There were so many families wanting us to come to their house that we would have needed an extra day to follow all the invitations. The families wanted to express their gratitude for what we have offered to their community by treating us with their



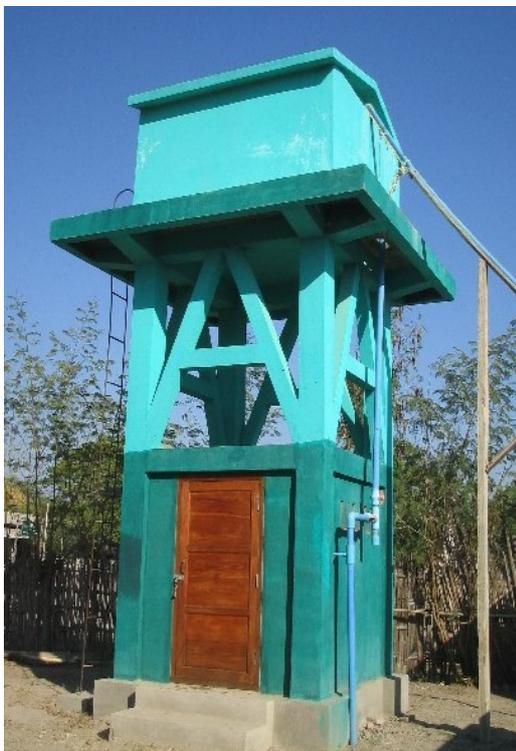
The old folks enjoying the mohinga

hospitality. According to tradition, they welcomed us with a variety of snacks and beverages, such as fried beans (grown in their fields), sweets made from rice flour, sticky rice, water melons, bananas, fried fish (from the Mu River), as well as green tea, coffee, lemon juice, or honey (locally

produced). The lay people were soon at the limit of what their stomachs could hold. To the repeated words, “Eat, eat – eat more, eat this, eat that!” they had to politely say, “No, thank you.” For Venerable Vira Ñani and myself it was a bit easier, because people knew that we, as nuns, were not allowed to eat after noon. But still, to drink one glass of lemon juice after the other or to eat several little bowls of honey in the course of that afternoon was a bit much. We were lucky that it was still light when we got back to the school where we had two rooms to stay, one for the ‘boys’ and one for the ‘girls.’



A table laden with food and drinks



The water tower with the water tank (above) and the shower room (below)

In the past two years, we had had to go down to the river to take a shower. This year we could use the new shower that was built under the water tower in the school. This water tower was among the things we offered last year. Until last year, every day the students had to carry buckets of water to fill the little water tanks in the toilets – a time consuming and hard job. Now they no longer have to do this tedious work. With a generator, the water is pumped up into the tank. There are pipes from the tank that not only go directly to the toilets, but also to different places in the school yard. In this way, students can wash their hands or water the nearby plants and flowers.

Let me finish this update with the blessings of Daw Htwe Ohn, a 82-year-old grandmother from Thaleba:

“May you be healthy and well in both body and mind.
May you be free from danger and enmity.
May all your wishes be fulfilled and may you become fully liberated.”

With metta
Ariya Ñani