



Gifts of Peace

Offerings to Nuns



This year, thanks to your very generous support, we had the good fortune to be able to distribute 151 Lakh Kyat (about 15,000 USD) to 20 nunneries, altogether supporting about 220 individual nuns.

This was slightly fewer recipients than in 2009. With 1500 nunneries in our township alone, the list of potential offerings seemed endless. But we wanted to continue giving to nunneries in ways that will maximize the long-lasting benefits of your generosity. So at the beginning of this year's cycle of offerings, we decided to give a more substantial amount to fewer nunneries than we had last year.



The next generation of nuns

We felt comfortable doing this in part because we knew that (with more yogis again coming to Shwe Oo Min Centre this year), a number of the nunneries we had offered to before would be supported in ways that they hadn't been for several years, since before Cyclone Nargis.

At some point early in January, we reflected that this year people's needs were not as obvious as they had been in the last few years since the cyclone hit. And as Daw Ariya Nani has reported to you earlier, the nuns had done so much with your dana (donation, offering) from last year. But once we probed a little and began to get more detailed information, it became clear that much remains undone.

Finding out just what was needed where was a happy task for us, as we visited each nunnery to see the results of what they had done with the dana from last year, and looked to see what was still lacking.

And then (after we'd changed your hard-earned--and perfectly beautiful!--dollars into stacks of much less pristine Myanmar currency) we could set out down the village road loaded down with immense amounts of cash, only to return some hours later empty-handed. One of those days, after we'd spent the entire morning distributing dana and were finally coming back through the Chanmyay Myaing gates, we spontaneously and joyfully chanted the Burmese phrase commonly used to share merit after any wholesome deed. It was a happy moment and one where each of you was very much present in our hearts and minds. We only do the physical offering; but it's your generosity that's the true engine of all of our work.

So what did all your cash do?

Each nunnery had its own particular list of requirements. But the needs that the nuns most frequently expressed were for improvements to their water supply, and structural repairs or expansions to their buildings. It would take many pages to give you a complete picture; what follows are just a few highlights.



There goes your dana!

Water

As Westerners, we all take clean running water pretty much for granted. The situation here in village Burma is vastly different. Most people get their water from shallow surface wells the old-fashioned way--with ropes and buckets.



*The simple and tidy well and washing area,
May Thitha Oo Nunnery*

All the nunneries have some kind of well. The most basic of these requires the water to be raised by hand. Sometimes there will be a concrete floor around the well, sometimes only mud or brick. Little by little, these basic wells can be improved with pipes and pumps so that there's running water 'on demand'. It's an expensive process, though, so the nuns usually make improvements a little at a time, as they can afford. Even with pipes, the water that comes out may not be good enough for drinking. That requires deeper drilling than a surface well--which is much more expensive!

Sasanaramsi Nunnery, next-door to CMMC, typifies the situation of many of the nunneries in our area. It's a place that hums with energy and life: there are 24 nuns living here, 20 kids and 4 adult teachers. Every morning and evening we can hear their puja (chanting), and usually at night there's the cacophony of all the little ones repeating their lessons out loud (rote memorization is still the way most students learn in Burma, whether they're studying Buddhadhamma or Biology). The senior nuns are justly proud of their academic achievements, and teach the young nuns at a very high level. All these nuns (and some of the neighbors as well) get their water from a very primitive well--not much more than an open hole in the ground with concrete sides to keep out the mud. There's a pump, but it doesn't always work. When we asked about the water situation, and they admitted that yes, they needed to build a good wall around it. So we were happy to offer them dana for this, knowing that once clean water is easily available, many lives (and the general level of health) will be vastly improved. (Because the nunnery is right next door to us at CMMC, Sayadaw U Indaka has run a power line over the little stream between us, and has offered them electricity for a year. So now thanks to his generosity, there's a way to run the pump also.)



*The daily water routine at Sasanaramsi
Nunnery*



*The new well
shelter at Laputta
Nunnery*

At the Appamada Nunnery, the process is a bit further along. They already had a decent well, but needed about 500 USD for the pipes needed to deepen it so it could provide drinking water. For nuns living on the money they can get on alms, 500 USD is a vast sum. Mostly they receive 10, 20, or 50 Kyat notes, and so one day of alms-round may only bring in 1800 – 2000 Kyat (one US dollar is worth roughly 1000 Kyat). So your dana saved these nuns from a very long wait while the cash could be slowly accumulated!

A fully functioning well with pump, pipes and built-in electrical supply is usually requires the generosity of a number of donors. At the Sasanasukhacari Laputta Nunnery, for example, Daw Uttama showed us the new well with pipes and a pump that had been donated to them by a Vietnamese monk. But they couldn't use it much of the time because it requires electricity--and that's available only sporadically and unpredictably, especially in the dry season when water is most needed. So the equipment to be able to run the pump on their own (a small generator, transformer and electric wires) was given by our friends Christine and Peter, part of a beautiful offering they made in lieu of spending money for an expensive wedding celebration! Then to complete their 'water project', the nuns used your dana to build a roof for the well and pump equipment to ensure that the equipment would be protected from the weather and useable for many years to come.



Hard work for a young nun

Building Projects



The very porous wall at Kyesinaye Nunnery

Along with water, better structures topped the wish lists for the nuns. A few of the nunneries have substantial brick and concrete buildings. However, many are far less fortunate; most of the nuns we know live in bamboo shacks that have less floor space than the average 'McMansion' garage in America. And often these flimsy structures are packed to the gills with youngsters. But the nuns put up with these conditions quite cheerfully. Never once have we heard them complain, and sometimes it even takes a little prompting to get them to tell us what they need in the way of improvements!

At Kyesinaye nunnery, there are 11 nuns living under the guidance of Daw Somatheri, who is 38 years old, and 19 vassa (rains retreats, the way one's seniority as a monk or nun is calculated). The youngest nun there is typical of many kids who ordain early: she's only 4 years old, and has already lost one parent. When her mother died, she came to the nunnery because there she'd be able to receive better food, education and care than would have been possible at home. When we went to visit Kyesinaye,

we could see that the nuns had made great strides in improving their building since last year, with a new brick wall and toilet. But it was obvious, too, that the bamboo walls upstairs badly needed to be replaced and they told us (when we probed) that they also need a second toilet. So the we offered them dana for both these these projects.

At the Sasanasukhacari Laputta Nunnery, we could see that in spite of the big improvements they'd been able to make last year, the main building was increasingly unstable. Other friends had provided dana to fix the roof, but there was nothing for the bamboo walls which now had a year's-worth of wear, and the kitchen, which was in especially bad shape (bamboo walls and floors are relatively inexpensive, but they have a very short usable life--6 months or a year at best). In addition, the old floor joists and upright posts that they'd reused from the original building were showing signs of termite damage and were beginning to lean. A lot of



Nuns at work in a rustic kitchen

work was needed, and all these tasks needed to be done urgently, before the onset of the heavy monsoon rains in June. So the dana we offered was immensely appreciated, allowing them to immediately begin the reconstruction.



From this

In addition to repairs, we were sometimes asked to help with the costs of finishing partly built structures. It's not uncommon in Burma for people to complete as much of a new building as they can afford, leaving the unfinished structure to begin the process of decomposition long before it's even finished. So at Chanmyavati nunnery, for example, the dana we offered will be used towards the completion of a partially finished hostel. Chanmyavati is a long-established nunnery that was badly damaged when Cyclone Nargis struck in 2008. Since then they have been slowly and patiently building a much more substantial structure.

Patience, because it will be a two-storey structure, made of brick and cement--a very expensive project to be built a little by little by little. So as funds come in, they are used to buy bits and pieces of the new building; the money you offered was enough to buy the metal roof! Until the new building is useable, many of the nuns have to sleep in a bamboo hut that is freezing in the cold season and permeable to all manner of creatures as it gets hotter. So they were very happy to receive this big step forward!



..... to this: a work of time and patience!

Other Projects

General Support

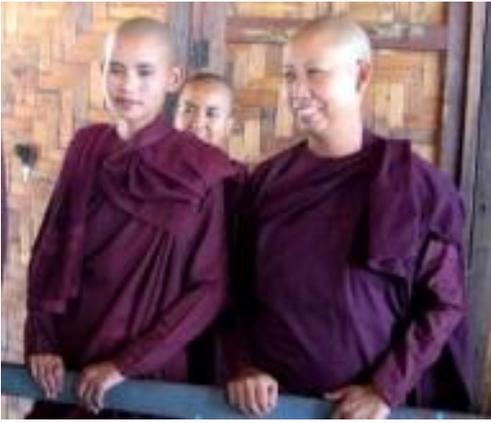


Paññayaungkyi Nunnery, Nwe Kwe Village

We offered general support to a number of nuns we had met in the last years, and to a few new nunneries that were recommended to us as being worthy recipients of dana.

Not far up the road from us, in the village of Nwe Kwe, there are a number of small nunneries clustered together next to a small pagoda. Two of these nunneries are substantial, the others are home to one or perhaps two nuns, living quiet lives devoted to the Dhamma. The idyllic setting is deceptive. Because they have only the barest of support all these nuns *must* live simple lives; poverty forces that on them even if they would otherwise want to choose such a life. But in spite of their hard lives, we were happy to see

improvements to buildings and to the general health of the nuns. This year we'd decided to offer these nunneries a set amount per capita, and spent the afternoon going from one little bamboo house to the next, visiting and making the formal offerings. At each little house, as the dana was offered, the nuns chanted a blessing in Burmese, or Pali, or both, and the sound of chanting went slowly around the village, following our steadily shrinking bags of cash.



A few of the Shwe Taung Oo nuns

Farther afield, in the Sagaing Hills near Mandalay, we visited Shwe Thaug Oo Nunnery, which we'd learned about from our friend Sr. Kathleen (an Irish Catholic nun living in Mandalay). This nunnery has several branches with a total population of several hundred nuns, and it's known for its high standards of sila (ethical conduct) and study. Here, all the nuns live on ten precepts (requiring them to forgo handling money); this is a relatively unusual practice for nuns in Myanmar. Unfortunately we had almost no time to spend here, because we were on our way up to Thaleba (Sayadaw U Indaka's village) to make the offering to the elders. But the little we saw deeply moved and impressed us. These brown-robed nuns (another rarity here

in Myanmar) were clearly very serious scholars and Dhamma practitioners; they were also beautiful and very 'light' beings. It was a quick, but very joyful meeting--and we resolved to come up to Mandalay a day or so earlier next year so that we can spend more time getting to know these nuns.

And we were very happy to be able to continue our support for some of the nunneries on the West coast of Myanmar. Last year, we had visited a number of nunneries while on a pilgrimage to Mrauk Oo with our friend Marjo Oosterhoff; she went again this year, offering dana to two of these: the Kyaikasan Nunnery in the coastal town of Sittwe, and to the 'Bandoola nuns' in the inland town of Mrauk Oo. The latter is not a single nunnery, but a 'neighborhood' of 25 nuns, all living side by side in the same area. As we'd done last year, Marjo first went to visit and to find out how many nuns were living there. The next day she went with the formal offerings: 20,000 Kyat (about 20 US Dollars) for each nun. This is more than they receive in many months of going out on alms-rounds, and so is a greatly appreciated gift.



Daw Susanasingi (l), not yet looking her age!

At the Kyaikasan Nunnery, Marjo was greeted very happily; they remembered our visit last year, and so she was feted as though she were a long-lost member of the family! The oldest nun there, Daw Susanasingi (82 years old, 52 of them as a nun) was still going strong, as garrulous and outgoing as ever. Marjo offered your dana so that the nuns could build a concrete floor around the well and for repairs and improvements to the monastery buildings.

Schools



Some of the nuns at Zaloon Parahita gather to say "Thanks!"

Last year we offered a substantial sum to Zaloon Parahita Nunnery, which has a population of over 50 girls from all over Myanmar. This year, we heard that they had started a school: in fact, several other nunneries told us that they sent their nuns there as day students. So we were more than a little curious--what would the school look like, and where in the world would they *put* it?! What we had seen before was one main building and the start of a new addition. Together, these would hardly have been big enough to hold a functioning school.

When we arrived this year to offer dana, it was just after the end of the school day and we passed dozens of students on their way home. Some were novices, some were nuns, and others were lay children wearing the typical green longyi and white blouse that is the school uniform used by students all over Myanmar. Entering the gate we were amazed at the sight that greeted us: a cluster of bamboo buildings where before there had just been empty space. As Daw Ayesinghi came out to greet us, we noticed that the many young resident nuns were busy tidying up the grounds after the end of the school day. She proudly showed us the new buildings, telling us that, yes, she'd started the school on the 6th of June last year. Inside, she showed us the large open classrooms, and then took us back outside where there were covered areas so that the children could study protected from the harsh tropical sun. Now, in addition to the 58 resident nuns, there are 135 day students. Attendance is free of charge for classes that range from primary through middle school (up to grade 8). She hires 7 teachers to teach a curriculum that is essentially the same as a 'regular' government school, although additionally, she teaches 'Buddhist culture' two days per week. Support for teacher's salaries (each teacher gets 30,000 Kyat or roughly 30 US Dollars per month) comes from local donors; we were so pleased to be able to add generously to this, and for the general support of the nunnery. We'd decided ahead of time to offer a certain amount there, but were so impressed by what we saw that we quickly revised our plans 'on the spot' and doubled what we'd intended to give.



Inside the Zaloon Parahita School



Daw Yuzana's new classrooms

Another impressive free 'monastic' school is run by Daw Yuzana, who lives in a monastery about a 15 minute drive from us. Daw Yuzana is a compact powerhouse of a woman who single-handedly founded the school right after Cyclone Nargis, doing an astonishing job of building and starting it in only a few weeks. Now it's well established, and Burmese donors from America have offered a handsome classroom block to replace the bamboo structures that Daw Yuzana erected to start with. Like the Salon Parahita School, some of the kids here are resident nuns, while others are day students from outside. Daw Yuzana's school

goes up to 10th Standard (the highest grade in Myanmar before University), and offers the kids an education that allows them to pass the 10th Standard Examinations that are required for University entrance. Getting the necessary funds to run a school this size is a challenge for anyone, and especially for a nun living on dana! So she received your generosity very gladly--as we had very gladly offered it, knowing it would go directly to the nearly 200 students!

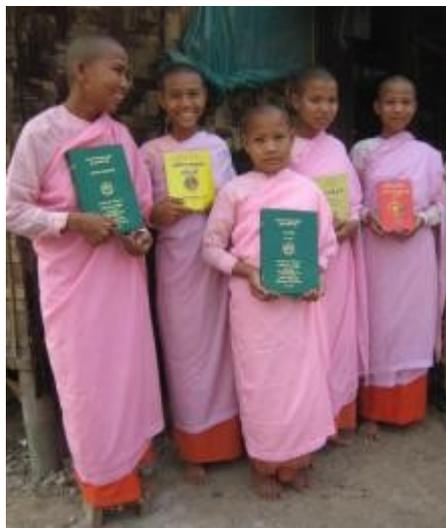
Expansion

When we first met Daw Obhasa at the Mingalagonwei Nunnery in 2008, it was shortly after Cyclone Nargis. She was struggling to start up her nunnery under the most difficult conditions imaginable. She had high hopes, a pure heart, and a clear vision of what she wanted to do, but many obstacles--not the least of which was simply trying to make ends meet in a world that had been turned upside down by the storm. This last year, with our help, and the generous help of other friends, she was able resolve the debt that had been burdening her. Now she wanted to expand the nunnery so that it could comfortably hold the 26 nuns that are living there, packed into a small space like sardines in a tin. The neighboring farmer was going to sell, and would let her buy a piece of land that would extend her property 20 feet on the short side and 40 feet on the long (back) side. She wanted to expand, but didn't want to go into debt again. So when we asked what she needed, the reply was immediate. She very much hoped to purchase the property, and also needed to repair the leaking roof of the existing building and wanted also to install a concrete floor for the bathhouse. We happily offered dana for the land, and with some additional dana of a Swiss friend she could expand the present house and repair the roof, knowing that step by step, the other projects will unfold.



So many nuns, so little space! 16 of the 26 nuns living at Mingalagonwei Nunnery

Dhamma Dana



A happy day: new books!

Two nunneries (Sanasukhasari Laputta Nunnery and Mingalagonwei Nunnery) asked for help buying Dhamma books. At Sanasukhasari, the termites had come and eaten holes not only in their house, but also in their books! And at Mingalagonwei, the pressing need for housing and simply putting food on the table had prevented them from buying the Pali and Burmese books the kids needed. So, armed with the lists of the titles the nuns gave us, we went to the bookstalls near the Shwedagon Pagoda, and emerged laden with stacks of freshly printed and bound books (booksellers here often do the printing and binding with the help of copy machines and a widespread disregard of copyright laws!). The Mingalagonwei nuns had placed their order ahead of time, and so when we went to pick up the books, we were delighted to see that

both the name of the nunnery and the names of the donors were proudly stamped on the covers. So every time they open one of the books, they'll be sending metta to you: "Dhamma friends from around the world"!

Books are expensive luxuries in Myanmar, and are treasured. So we were also happy to facilitate the purchase of some solid book cabinets to protect the new volumes (thanks to the generosity of our friends Melanie and Thilo).



Furniture moving, Burmese style!

Telephone and electricity

In the West, just as with running water, we take telephone and electricity for granted. Here in Burma, however, both of these things require astonishing outlays of cash at the outset, just for establishing service and for the basic wiring. As a result, many people do without either, unable to afford the huge fees. For the nuns, however, having electricity at night is of great benefit, allowing them valuable time for study. And telephone service is rare in villages--usually people go to phone shops if they need to make a call. In remote areas, this requires a long walk or bus ride.

Mya Thitha Oo is a new nunnery, which was started last year with the help of our donations. They now have a basic structure mostly finished--but they still have no electricity. So we offered enough dana for them to get power, knowing the studies of the 11 nuns living there would be greatly supported by this. Ma Sucari, the abbess and teacher here, has been a nun for 19 years and has a Dhammacariya degree (no small accomplishment!) and so the standard of teaching here is very high. We were also impressed with how tidy this nunnery is: they've created a lovely and very well-maintained garden with vegetables and flowers, not the norm in Burma where a garden often means swept bare earth. Having electric light at night will ensure that the nun's scholastic achievements attain the same level!



*The nice garden of Mya Thitha Oo
Nunnery*

Late in January, we were asked if it would be possible to help the Thit Sein nunnery in Sagaing Hills with the start-up costs for getting phone service. These nuns live very close to Kyaswa Monastery, where Sayadaw U Lakkhana holds an annual retreat for foreign yogis each January, so Carol Wilson and I know them quite well (she from teaching that retreat, and I from managing it). Normally, we wouldn't offer dana for relative luxuries as telephones, but there was a typically Burmese story behind the request that made it very easy for us to say yes. The nuns had had a lay supporter who offered most of the fee last year. This had come to 90 Lakh Kyat, almost 9000 US Dollars!!! (A Lakh is a numerical unit used here and in India, meaning 100,000.) There was a relatively small unpaid balance remaining of 7 Lakh Kyat (about 700 US Dollars)--but unfortunately in the meantime their donor had died. So the entire sum would be forfeit to Myanmar Telecom if the nuns did not pay the total due immediately! When I went to the monastery to offer her the balance of the fee, I was delighted when the abbess Daw Yuzana (not the same Daw Yuzana as near us; this is not a common nun's name) took me to pay respects to the oldest nun there, who (at over 91 years of age) has had over 70 years in robes. Being able to use their own phone to call a doctor for her care will be more than a small convenience for these wonderful nuns. Daw Yuzana proudly showed me her Dhammacariya diploma--which she had not yet earned last time I'd seen her. Because of her many teaching and administrative duties, it had taken her 10 years of hard work to gain this coveted degree (equivalent to a BA). This level of dedication is by no means unusual in 'ordinary' Burmese nuns, and such devotion to the Dhamma and to their work in the world continues to inspire us!

The Future

On an unseasonably cool March morning recently, we went to visit our friends at two of the nunneries we have come to know well. It had been only a month or so since we'd distributed your dana, and we didn't think we'd see many changes. But much to our delight and surprise, they proudly showed us all the improvements they have made with your dana.

At Sasanasukhasari, the roof and foundations had been improved and the entire area behind the main building had been enclosed in an entirely new structure. The new addition contains a sleeping loft, a new and expanded kitchen with a concrete floor, and encloses the toilets which had once been a wet walk out the back door of main building in the middle of the night. They'd wasted no time! Even without seeing the impressive changes, the *speed* of the work spoke volumes to us about how much they needed and appreciated your support.



The new addition at the Laputta Nunnery

At Mingalagonwei, the new land has been bought, cleared, and fenced. The roof has also been repaired, and already a new extension has been completed onto the existing building. This



Space to grow for the nuns at Mingalagonwei!

gives them much more living space, and room for future improvements. As she showed us the new land and the improved house, Daw Obhasa could hardly contain her thanks to us and our friends. Over and over, she expressed her immense gratitude for all the support you have sent: "you are all my mothers!" Last year we could see the weight of worry on her frail shoulders. Now she is bright and buoyant, full of eagerness and energy.

A few of the nunneries we have offered to have very comfortable and solid dwellings. However, in most cases improvements to the buildings are still sorely needed: the living conditions that some of these women quietly put up with are far from

ideal. It's our long-term vision to bring each of these nunneries up to the same relatively high standard of living--with weather-proof brick buildings, decent concrete toilets and washing areas, electricity, and readily accessible drinking water. This goal is still a very long way off. But a little at a time, important improvements are being made.

And even without completing these tasks, your offerings to these women are immensely important, sustaining their lives in ways that allow them to live with dignity and peace of mind. Thanks to your support, they can spend the energy of their lives doing all the good work they do, rather than wondering how they'll keep dry in the rainy season, or where the next meal will come from. This gift is one of great peace: peace of mind for them, which then translates through their actions and work to greater peace in the world.

You could give no better gift than this.



The newest resident at Sasanasukhacari Laputta Nunnery

So we who act as the hands offering your dana, and the nuns who receive it, are full of thanks for your heartfelt generosity and good wishes. And so we very joyfully share the merit of your acts of kindness in Burmese fashion by saying three times (as we did that day coming through the gates):

“Ahmya... Ahmya... Ahmya... Yudo mukya pa koun lo... “Thadhu, thadhu, thadhu!!!”
 (“Sharing...sharing...sharing... May all beings rejoice in this, saying “Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu!!!”)

Daw Virañānī
Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre

