

*Metta In Action Update*  
*March 2011 (3)*



**"OH, WHAT A RELIEF IT IS...!"**

*Dāna to Nuns*

**Consolidating and Completing...**

For the last few years we've been making offerings to nunneries of relatively small amounts of *dāna* for improvements or partial renovations of existing structures, little by little helping these nuns build more substantial buildings. This year, thanks to your wonderful generosity, we had more *dāna* than ever before to distribute, and so have been able to continue that task in earnest, consolidating and (literally) building on the gains that have already been made. Our hope and wish for the long-term is that eventually the living conditions of all these nuns will be raised to the same level of hygiene and comfort.

We Westerners tend to take our standard of living completely for granted. But imagine for a moment. You are the abbess of a growing nunnery on the Northern edge of Yangon. Twice a week you go into the city with your young nuns to walk all day collecting alms. With the *dāna* that comes from that, there may not even be enough to feed everyone, let alone to begin any big projects. But you need to build a decent dormitory building, and the

toilets that were built as temporary structures a few years ago are beginning to fall apart. And just yesterday some people from your village in the Irrawaddy Delta contacted you to say that they want to send 10 more orphan or poor girls to you to be ordained. You very much want to take the girls in, but where will you put them—and what will you do about improving the building and the toilets? Sleep doesn't come easily with these thoughts rolling around in your mind.

This is no make-believe scenario, but the hard reality that the nuns here in Myanmar face all too frequently. As we went around visiting the nunneries before distributing your *dāna* this January, we heard this story (or some variant of it) many times. The most frequent answer to our query of “What do you need this year?” was “Toilets!”—closely followed by “A better... (kitchen, dormitory, bathhouse, etc.).”

As Carol so pithily remarked one morning during a discussion about upcoming offerings, “We're in favor of toilets!” At the time we all

laughed. But for the nuns it's really no laughing matter: if there are 25 or more people using only 2 toilets, it's a health hazard and daily challenge. And we're in favor of people having safe and comfortable accommodations, too. So there's a lot of joy in being able to gradually make this possible for these wonderful women who do so much good in the world.



The comfortable upstairs sleeping area at Chanmyay Thayar

Two of the nunneries that we support provide a vivid illustration of the gap that must be filled. Chanmyay Thayar Nunnery has a solid two-story building with concrete toilets out back and an adjacent partially completed brick kitchen with a concrete floor. The main structure was built about 4 years ago with funds donated by foreign yogis who were practicing at the Shwe Oo Min Centre, and the kitchen has been gradually built and improved since then. Prior to that, more than 20 people were jammed into a small and rustic bamboo structure not much bigger than the average western living room. But now the 26 nuns that live here have clean, sturdy, and comfortable buildings that are dry in the rainy season and warm in the cold season. Their major infrastructure needs are now taken care of.

Right behind the Chanmyay Thayar is the Sasanasukhacari Laputta Nunnery. When we first met these nuns after Cyclone Nargis in 2008, the 11 ‘Laputta Nuns’ were living in a little bamboo house that had been damaged by the storm and was



Three Laputta nuns returning home with the day's donations of raw rice



The tidy but rustic interior at the Laputta Nunnery



New walls for the Laputta Nunnery!

what the Chanmyay Thayar Nuns were able to do four years ago. However, this takes both land and money—both of which are becoming increasingly difficult to get as land values soar on the outskirts of Yangon, and as inflation takes its toll on the buying power of the Kyat. So that option's not



...As are the new toilets ! The old toilets are in the background.

leaking badly. Since then, with our help and *dāna* from others they've been little by little expanding and improving. But there's still a long way to go before they reach the same standard of hygiene and comfort as the nuns next-door at Chanmyay Thayar.

Since these two nunneries are neighbors, there's an inevitable dialog that happens across the back fence. Daw Uttara from the Laputta nunnery told us that sometimes she hears the youngest nuns saying to their counterparts next door, "We wish we could live in a nice big brick building like you have, too!" And we would very much like to see this wish come true, and so are glad that with your help we can do something 'concrete' to help! The basic living standard of many of the nunneries we support is similar to that of the Laputta Nunnery, so there is much work yet to be done.

The ideal situation for the nunneries that need good buildings would be to be able build an entire structure from the ground up; this is what the Chanmyay Thayar Nuns were able to do four years ago. However, this takes both land and money—both of which are becoming increasingly difficult to get as land values soar on the outskirts of Yangon, and as inflation takes its toll on the buying power of the Kyat. So that option's not possible for most of the nuns. But what we are helping them to do is to construct better buildings room by room or wall by wall.



At Sasanaramsi, a new bathhouse is taking shape...

So one by one we visited the nunneries and made our offerings, giving money to build walls, toilets, kitchens, washhouses, or new wells. And as happened last year, the almost instantaneous response of the nuns was most gratifying! One day we were walking home down the back road when we met a huge lorry carrying bags of concrete and bricks. And in the front seat next to the driver was a beaming Daw Uttama from the Laputta Nunnery. Only the day before we'd made an offering there, and the nuns had sprung into action. A few weeks later, the Laputta nunnery already had new brick walls supporting a whole new upstairs sleeping area. And the construction continues.

At the Sasanaramsi Nunnery, a dramatic metamorphosis has been unfolding right under the back windows of the Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre—and we have been watching with great interest and happiness! For the last two months, the foreign yogis have been bombarded by the construction sounds from next door as the nunnery compound was being thoroughly upgraded. From the interview room



The day before their ordination (L-Rt) Ma Thet Thet Mon, Ma Thein Thein, and Ma Thuzin

on the top floor of the foreigner’s building, first we saw a whole new blue roof appear on the main building. Then a new bamboo dormitory building sprang up in the front of the compound, and as I write, there’s another new dorm being built in front of that. The new washhouse that was begun last year has been finished, a new well has been dug, and a whole a new toilet block is under construction.

All of this couldn’t have come at a better time. When we went to make our offering there, Daw Malasingi told us that she was expecting 10 new girls to arrive any day—and conditions were already very crowded. The nuns

were sleeping like sardines in a tin in the increasingly over-crowded dormitory building, and there were only 2 crumbling toilets for the nuns.

A month or so later, we were introduced to three of the children who had arrived from the Irrawaddy Delta, on the day before they were to be ordained as nuns. The next day we went again to take pictures of the new nuns. They were obviously still unused to their new clothes, but even the youngest of the three wore the robes with grace and dignity. The girls were very reserved around us ‘strange’ foreigners, but Ma Candamala was able to shyly whisper “Pyaw ba de...” (“I’m happy”) when asked how she felt about being here. Even though these new nuns are far away from home, there’s great love and support in their new Dhamma family—and no shortage of new friends.



...And after their ordination (L-Rt) Ma Candamala, Ma Sumala, and Ma Sucitta

Many of the young nuns at Sasanaramsi Nunnery are orphans, or come from very poor backgrounds. And after Cyclone Nargis, people in the Irrawaddy Delta continue to struggle economically. So families are happy to be able to send their daughters here so that they can have a better life and a better education than they would ever be able to get at home. There’s great trust and faith in these nuns, and they take the responsibility of taking in these children seriously by doing their utmost to honor that trust. The standard of study here is extremely high and some of the young nuns are gifted students.



Digging foundations for the new (brick!) kitchen building at the Mingalagonwei Nunnery

At the Mingalagonwei nunnery, Daw Obhasa’s long-term vision is beginning to take shape, and she wasted no time after we’d made the offering there in starting work on the new toilets. Since she acquired the new land last year, she’d been planning on tucking a toilet block in the back corner of the property, and with your *dāna* this year she was finally able to do exactly that. The before and after photos that open this update need no further explanation! And as soon as the toilets had been mostly finished, the new kitchen construction had already begun. Daw Obhasa told us that on March 21<sup>st</sup>

10 of the nuns at Mingalagonwei Nunnery were to take examinations in 5 Dhamma subjects (Dhammapāda, two Abhidhamma subjects, Pāli Grammar, and Pāli-Myanmar translation); because of all the other work, for several weeks they had to study at night—going to bed at midnight, and getting up at the usual hour of 4 AM!

It's the Burmese way to build as much as possible with available resources and then to use a structure even before it's completely finished. But partially unfinished buildings are porous, and many creatures can come inside to share the living space. At Mya Thita Oo Nunnery, Ma Sucari told us that sometimes cobras come in through the unfinished windows of their building. But she said that the nuns made a *mettā* determination, and so nothing has ever happened; the snakes and the nuns co-exist harmoniously! When we visited these nuns we were happy to see the improvements they have made since last year: little by little their buildings are being completed.



*Mettā* in action at the Laputta Nunnery!

Even while they are living in partly finished structures, the nuns still manage to teach and to keep up their own studies. At the Laputta Nunnery, too, Daw Uttara told us that even though they are very busy with construction, during the school holidays, they are offering a 'Buddhist Cultural Course' for their own nuns, as well as for 15 poor kids from the immediate neighborhood. Every afternoon between 4 PM and 6 PM, the children are offered a Dhamma curriculum that will give them a firm foundation for future studies. The nuns are offering all the necessary supplies to the poor students free of charge.

The many nunneries in Nwe Kwe Village have also made big gains with the *dāna* we offered last year, and they intend to continue their improvements. As we went from one nunnery to the next, we were proudly shown new walls, new toilets, new kitchens and new washing areas. So much had been completed this last year! So we offered your *dāna* with a lot of joy, knowing that the improvements mean better health and better lives for all.



In Nwe Kwe: new toilets, new walls, new kitchens—from Dhamma Friends from all around the world!

Once their basic needs are taken care of, and buildings are finished, the nuns can thrive. At the Chanmyay Thayar we were invited to the big sharing of merit and meal offering held to mark the end of their 3-day *Paṭṭhāna* chanting. Nuns from many other nunneries had taken part, and we were deeply moved to see nuns from many different nunneries together in one place, celebrating Dhamma work completed jointly in the spirit



The Mya Thita Oo nuns in front of their partly finished shrine room and dormitory.



Ma Puññavati shows us her award

of *mettā*. Downstairs, we noticed that the awards some of the nuns had received from the Zaloon Parahita School were proudly on display in the book cabinet. And upstairs, the shrine room was packed with nuns and lay supporters. While taking in the scene, I couldn't help but remember the tiny shack these nuns had been living in not so very long ago. They've come a very long way!

Chanmyavati Nunnery is also in the middle of a long construction project, but for the first time early this year they were able to use their partly finished main building for the celebration of their *Paṭṭhāna* chanting. And in spite of the construction work the nuns there have done very well in their examinations. Daw Paññāsīrī showed us an award certificate won by one of the young nuns there who had placed at the top of her group in recent Dhamma examinations. When she introduced us to Ma Puññavati, I wondered where this young nun would be if she weren't here—and whether she would be able to go to school at all. Now she is clearly thriving, perhaps to become a Dhamma teacher herself someday.

## Further afield

Again this year we offered *dāna* to several nunneries that we know in other parts of Myanmar. On our way to Thaleba to offer the solar light, we were able to go to the Sagaing Hills to meet with the nuns we know there, and to share your generosity with them. For almost 1000 years, this beautiful area has been a place of Dhamma practice and study, and the Dhamma energy there is palpable.

Our first stop was the Shwe Taun Oo Nunnery. Many of the nuns here are 'study nuns,' but Daw Dhammasingi (the abbess) is a gifted teacher and so we were delighted to listen as she described how she guides yogis in concentration practice. Later she showed us around the very tidy compound, demonstrating the plumbing in the new water tank and washing area that they'd constructed with the *dāna* we'd offered last year. These nuns are all 10-precept nuns, which means they do not directly handle money. This is a rarity in Myanmar, and Daw Dhammasingi told us it had been their teacher's wish that the nuns take on the extra training precepts.

We were also very happy to be able offer some *dāna* to three nunneries in Kyaswa Village. It was a time of joyfully re-connecting with old Dhamma friends, and offering support of the Dhamma work they do so well. Visiting these nuns, I was struck once again by the strength and inclusivity of their communities. Youngsters live together with the elderly, mutually supporting each other with great *mettā*. No matter how old or young, everyone's contribution to the community is valued.



**The Nuns of Sagaing: ageless beauty, inside and out:**

