

## *Dropouts & Bright Kids*



**The small monastery which has become the Tuition School**

### **The Two Monks' Tuition School**

The two monks, U Thein Obhasa and U Vepolla, are dropouts! One was an officer in the military and the other one was a successful business man. Both of them were no longer happy with what they were doing, both of them wanted to do something more meaningful with their lives. They wanted to help and serve, rather than to command and exploit.

We first heard about these two extraordinary monks from U Paññaloka, a resident monk of the Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre (CMMC). One evening I was walking back and forth in front of my kuti as a means of doing some exercise. While walking up and down I radiated metta (loving-kindness) to all living beings, "May all beings live at ease and in peace. May all living beings ...". A little while later U Paññaloka came around the corner on his daily night-round of the centre. We exchanged some words and soon found ourselves engaged in a lively conversation about the lack of education for many kids in Burma.



**The students' slippers**

After U Paññaloka had finished his Dhamma studies, he was sent to a remote area in the Chin Hills (north-west Burma) in order to 'propagate and spread the *sasana* (the Buddhist teaching).' It was a challenging time because he did not have a lot of support, nor was there much work for him to do. One thing he started to do was to teach the kids from the surrounding villages. With these extra lessons, the kids had more chances to follow at school and U Paññaloka had found a way of spending his days in a useful and beneficial way.

In the course of this conversation, U Paññaloka mentioned that he had encouraged two monks living near CMMC to give tuition to the village kids. He said that these two monks lived in the small monastery next to the little pagoda further up the dusty road. They had moved into this monastery not long ago and were trying to figure out how they could be of benefit to others.

When U Paññaloka found out that one of them had a university degree, he suggested that they offer tuition to the kids in the neighbourhood. And this is what they started doing soon after that conversation.

When we went to visit the place in January, it was teeming with girls and boys. Some of the young students sat on the wooden platform under an open bamboo structure and some of them sat at the desks next to the small monastery building where U Thein Obhasa was teaching them maths.



**The young students are eager to learn and study**

In talking to the two monks, U Vepolla explained that he had been a successful business man, dealing in cigarettes, alcohol, and beer! But some years ago something started to stir inside him and so he went to the Pa Auk Meditation Centre. After meditating for three months he went home and back to his business. A while later he went again to the Pa Auk Meditation Centre, this time with the wish to ordain as a monk. But his parents did not give permission. He was the youngest son in the family and the parents wanted to

'keep' him in the family. However, as U Vepolla insisted to take up robes and live a monastic life, the parents finally agreed.



**U Thein Obhasa is teaching maths**

U Vepolla explained that his deepest wish was to do something to serve the community. He wanted to use his life in a way to benefit others. He was no longer satisfied with running his business which was not only aimed at gaining lots of profit for himself, but also involved selling things that are actually detrimental for peoples' health.

This is how he became a 'dropout', leaving his business and the lay-life behind, and taking up a mode of living that suits him much better.



**U Thein Obhasa**

In the mornings, the two monks give free tuition to the older students before they go to regular school. The younger students get free tuition in the late afternoon after they return from regular school. At present there are over one hundred kids who profit from these extra lessons. The quality of teaching in the regular (government) schools is very bad and additional tuition is almost a must if the students want to pass their exams. But, of course, many of the village families cannot afford to send their children to tuition, so this new tuition school fills a great need.



**U Vepolla**

The monastery does not have a well, and so the monks need to get the water from a neighbour. But they cannot get enough water this way; more is needed, especially to fill the buckets in the toilets for the students. U Vepolla told us that if they had their own well, then they would have enough water for themselves, and on top of that he could offer clean drinking water to about 30 families living nearby who

had no access to safe drinking water. To get a well was clearly one of his priorities, and so we were happy to tell him that we were going to offer a donation for the well.

A couple of days later U Vepolla came to CMMC with a detailed list of what was needed for the well and the water tanks. He had a contractor who had figured out how much it would cost. After carefully going through the list we happily offered the six lakhs kyats (about 750 \$). Only one day later we heard through U Paññaloka that they had already started to dig the well!



**The well is dug**



**The big water storage tank**

Three weeks later we visited again to see how far they had got. The well was dug, the big water storage tank was up, the smaller water tank was finished, and the water pipes had been put in. The only thing they could not yet do was to solidify the wall in the well. Because the water level was too high (actually a good thing) they had to wait until the hot season when the water level would be lower.

The two monks seemed very happy not only to get their own water supply but to be able to offer good and clean drinking water to the neighbouring families. In this way, they have one more way to benefit the community!

U Vepolla was quite surprised to hear that all of us who were present that day (Ven. Virañani, Carol, Marjo, and myself) have long-standing connections with Burma. He was impressed to see how much we not only value the Buddhist teachings but actually put them into practice. Based on this observation he used the following illustration:



“A frog sits on a beautiful lotus flower in the pond. But the frog does not enjoy the nice fragrance of the lotus flower.

A bee comes from far away, lands on the lotus flower, and enjoys the fragrance and the nectar of the lotus flower.

Likewise, I have grown up and live in a country where the *sasana* (the Buddhist teaching) is flourishing. But until recently I did not enjoy its fragrance.

Whereas you [foreigners] come from far away and DO enjoy the fragrance of the *sasana*.”

These two monks show me once more how the goodwill of one individual can change and improve the lives of many people. Even if it does not seem much from the outside, it can have far-reaching consequences for those who benefit from the support.

### Ma Khin Than Nwe



Ma Khin Than Nwe is an example of how a little financial support can change the course of life in a dramatic way.

Last year we started to support Ma Khin Than Nwe after we had rebuilt the family’s home. Her mother told us that she could not finish school but instead had to work in a factory to help support the family after their father had suddenly died.

According to the mother and neighbours, she was very smart and doing well at school. But she had to leave school after 9<sup>th</sup> standard and work in the factory. With this, she was unable to complete her secondary education and also missed the chance for further studies.

MIA supports Ma Khin Than Nwe with a monthly stipend that covers her school fees and provides some general support for the family. With Ma Khin Than Nwe no longer working, the monthly income for the family had been greatly reduced. The mother, Daw Mya Hlaing, runs a stall in front of her house selling fried snacks. These are very popular with the Burmese, and often by mid-morning the mother has already sold everything. After that she can attend to household chores, take care of the three younger children, and get some rest. In order to have the shop open at dawn she needs to get up every morning at three o’clock!



**Daw Mya Hlaing in her food stall**

Ma Khin Than Nwe is doing very well at school, passing the exams usually as first, second, or third in her class. Her teacher told us that her chances to pass the 10<sup>th</sup> standard exam are very high; she added by way of explanation that success in this exam also depends a lot on what questions are chosen.

This 10<sup>th</sup> standard exam is held all over Burma at the same time in March. The teacher explained that there are five sets of questions for the entire country which is divided into five segments for this all-important exam. Which set of questions each part of the country gets is determined by lottery. So if Ma Khin Than Nwe is lucky, she will get a relatively ‘easy’ set of questions. In other words, she will have questions that she can easily answer.

Ma Khin Than Nwe wants to continue her studies in IT or business administration. So if she passes this exam with high marks (360 points or more out of 400 possible), she will qualify for the 'Technological University' which offers the best quality education. There are other options for her, but the quality of the studies is not as good. The second choice is the Government Technological College, followed by the Business College, and the last choice would be the Dagon University.



**Ma Khin Than Nwe and her proud mother with the bicycle that we offered last year to easily attend tuition**

Ma Khin Than Nwe shows great zeal and effort in her studies. She is determined to pass the exam and to continue her education. To prepare for the exam she spends entire weekends at her tuition teacher's home. Under no circumstances does she want to miss her unique chance to get a degree! Her mother is proud of her daughter, and says that she does not mind all the hard work to care for the family. If her daughter passes the exam, she said, then all the hardships will not matter.

Ma Khin Than Nwe's story took a difficult turn on February 6<sup>th</sup>. In the evening, as I was giving a Dhamma talk to the foreign meditators at CMMC, Daw Mya Hlaing came to seek out our help. When I had finished the talk, Venerable Virañani approached me and said that she was waiting downstairs, obviously very distressed and greatly shaken.

It turned out that her daughter, Ma Khin Than Nwe, had been sick for three days. She had a high fever and big boils all over the body, she was unable to eat and could hardly drink any liquid, and at night she could not sleep tossing from one side to the other on the thin bamboo mat. Besides the pain and discomfort of the physical disease, the mental distress of both the mother and daughter was much bigger. It was only three weeks to go until the first exams started and both of them were greatly distressed to miss days that were precious for learning! The mother had not been selling her fried snacks for the past three days because she had been looking after her sick daughter day and night, besides caring for the three other kids. She was obviously overworked and very tired - and very close to a collapse.

We realised that we needed to do something to help them, right then and there. After a short discussion we decided to give her some money so that she could take her daughter to see a doctor immediately.

In Burma, many clinics are open until 9 or 10 pm. A reliable clinic with good doctors was a 15 minutes' drive from the centre. We told the mother to get the taxi from outside the centre (a neighbour of the centre makes a living by driving a taxi) and take her daughter to see a doctor at that clinic right away. Greatly relieved but also a bit embarrassed she took the money and left. Three days later she came back to the centre. She looked much better and the agitation from three days ago was no longer present. She said that her daughter had started to feel better and was even able to eat some rice gruel. In the patient's book that the



**Ma Khin Than Nwe and her younger brother and sisters**

mother showed us, we saw that the doctor had diagnosed her with measles and that he had prescribed a number of medicines.

The mother told us (Ariya Ñani & Virañani) how relieved she was that her daughter's health was improving and how grateful she was for our support. With tears in her eyes she said that she had nobody else to rely upon here in Yangon – but us.

The family is originally from the town of Pakkoku in Upper Burma, and only moved to Yangon about ten years ago. This means that Daw Mya Hlaing has no relatives or close friends in Yangon and, as a result, she does not have the traditional social security net in times of distress.

After drying her tears, she continued to say that she is radiating metta for us (the 'visible' members of MIA) every night ever since we started to support her daughter and the family. She said that she had infinite gratitude for us and that she never dreamt of getting such major support.

## Htoo Ko Ko

I wish you had seen the shining eyes and angelic smile on Htoo Ko Ko's face when he was told that we would support him in his further education! He reminded me of my brothers at Christmas when they got their favourite toys. It is always such a magic moment when a person's face lights up and shines with awe, wonder, and surprise.

Htoo Ko Ko is twenty years old and works on the construction site at CMMC. We had noticed two young and very helpful workers at the centre who were obviously from poor families. So we made enquiries about them and learned that Htoo Ko Ko is especially gifted. He had passed the 10<sup>th</sup> standard exam with excellent marks that would have enabled him to study at the Engineering College in Hmawbi (45 km north of Yangon), but his parents could not afford to pay for his further education. The meagre income of the father was barely enough to feed the family of five. That is why Htoo Ko Ko had started to work as a manual laborer, adding a regular income to support his parents and his two younger siblings. He gets 3000 kyats (2.5 US\$) per day and works six days a week.

At CMMC, Htoo Ko Ko is a skilled worker and always willing to help wherever needed. Mimmi, my Burmese friend, often has him carry the big 20-liter water container to our room. Whenever she calls him, he carries it cheerfully and with a smile.



**Working at  
CMMC**



**Htoo Ko Ko**

One day we spoke to him after work. He confirmed that he had passed the 10<sup>th</sup> standard exam and that he actually would have liked to study, but ... He said that also his parents would want him to study if they could afford it. After further questions, we decided to support him. When we told him the good news, we had a little overwhelmed boy sitting in front of us. It was such a beautiful moment – a moment that deeply touched the heart of all who were present!

A few days later we went to visit his family at their home near CMMC. The family is originally from the Irrawaddy District and moved to Yangon nine years ago. The father has no regular work; at present he works as a carpenter. The mother

stays home and does all the domestic chores. Htoo Ko Ko has a younger sister who is in 7<sup>th</sup> standard and a younger brother who is in 3<sup>rd</sup> standard. Very proudly he showed us his 10<sup>th</sup> standard certificate. Apparently, he passed the exam without having tuition (because the parents could not afford it). From what we have heard in these past years, without tuition it is very difficult for the students to pass this exam. The fact that Htoo Ko Ko passed without having had tuition means that he is an extraordinary smart boy. What he had achieved is in no way a piece of cake!



**Htoo Ko Ko's sister, brother, and mother**

In talking to the whole family, we noticed that his two younger siblings were also very smart. Especially the younger brother who was right on the spot when we asked him some questions.



**Proudly showing his 10<sup>th</sup> standard certificate**

The sister was a bit more shy but no less present than her brother. The mother sat there quietly following the conversation. She seemed to be the 'calm presence' in the family, grounded in her being.

When we asked the father how he would be able to support the family without the regular income of their son, he said that he would try to set up a little business. He said that one way or another he would try very hard to make it work!

Later on we reflected on his reaction and positive outlook. Many people in the West would probably be worried and anxious of how to deal with such a situation. How could they make it? And what if it wouldn't work out?

The attitude of the father was one of trust and confidence. For him there was a situation that needed a certain action to be taken. And as such there was no worry or hesitation, but simply a challenge to be met.

The courses at the Engineering College start in November, so Htoo Ko Ko and his family have enough time to organise themselves.



**Htoo Ko Ko and his family are posing in front of their home**

Right now as I am writing this update I feel so much joy for Htoo Ko Ko and his family. Strange connections and invisible hands have brought Htoo Ko Ko into our presence to help change the course of life of a young Burmese man and his family.

Of course, we are aware that there are hundreds, even thousands, of Htoo Ko Kos in Burma. And not only are there innumerable young girls and boys in Burma who are gifted but cannot study, but there are also uncountable girls and boys all over the world who share the same fate.



**With your support, the life of these bright kids can definitely be changed!**

With metta  
Ariya Ñani