

## *The Knowledge Pot of Gold*



In Burma, many people know the saying, “*Pañña shwe oh, lu ma kho.*” It can be rendered into English as, “Nobody can steal the knowledge pot of gold.”

In the olden days, people’s wealth was often measured in gold coins. These gold coins were kept in big pots and stored in either a treasury or were buried underground. Whatever precautions were taken to prevent the loss of this wealth, thieves always found ways and means to steal peoples’ pots of gold.

A ‘knowledge pot of gold’ (set up and increased through education) is quite different from this. Whatever knowledge a person acquires, it cannot be stolen by any thieves. Burglars can take gold, cows, computers, clothes, food, or books, but they can never steal a person’s knowledge. Because of this one’s knowledge is more precious than innumerable pots of gold.

## Education Funds

The MIA Education Fund in Thaleba was established last year so that poor children who otherwise would not have been able to attend school could do so. It turned out that there were 77 kids in Thaleba who either had never gone to school or who could no longer continue their education. These kids are now supported by the fund, and their teachers said that all but two of them are doing well and attending school regularly. Only two students are lazy and need to constantly be pushed to learn and study well.



**The five students supported by the Education Fund who will sit for the 10th standard exam**

From left to right: Ma Thae Mar Aye, Ma War War Naing, Ma Thwe Thwe, Ma Thu Thu, Ko Aung Zayar Phone

Five among these students are now in 10<sup>th</sup> standard, the final year of secondary schooling in Burma. In March, they will have to sit for the all-important 10<sup>th</sup> standard exam. Those who pass this exam are allowed to study at the university, and the subjects they can study depend on the marks they get. Only those with top marks can study medicine, lesser marks entitle them to study other subjects. Even if a student does not continue to study, she or he will have many more options of getting a job with the certificate of the 10<sup>th</sup> standard exam.

We talked to these five students, four girls and one boy, asking them what they wanted to do if they passed the exam. The boy, Ko Aung Zayar Phone, said that he wanted to go to Pyin Oo Lwin and do the military school. Ma Thu Thu said that she wants to study physics, whereas her twin sister, Ma Thwe Thwe, wants to study English. Ma War War Naing wants to do the teacher training course and become a school teacher. Ma Thae Mar Aye's dream is to become an actress.

When we asked their teacher what the chances were of them passing the exam, she said that most likely three of them will be able to pass.

Let's hope that all of them will pass the exam and come a bit closer to their dream! It would be nice if the MIA Education Fund could support these students in the years to come, making it possible for them to get a good education. Wouldn't it be a source of great joy to enable them to make their dreams come true?!



**Hmm, what a treat!**

As a little sign of appreciation for all the students' effort to study and learn we offered a meal to all the school children in Thaleba. A couple of weeks before our visit we asked what the kids would prefer: rice & curry or a vermicelli soup. They chose the vermicelli soup, probably because the kids get rice & curry every day whereas the soup was something really special. They liked the vermicelli soup very much! Their shining eyes spoke more than a thousand words – we watched as many of the kids took second and third helpings.



**Of course, I like it!**

Knowing how important it is for children to get at least a basic education, we wanted to expand our support to more children. There would be no difficulty in finding thousands of other children who cannot go to school. But it is important to us to maintain personal connections to the people or communities we support. In this way, we know that our donations are well used and each year we can follow up on them. Therefore, we not only need to limit the scope of our projects due to our limited man/woman-power, but also because each year we only have a limited time together in Burma to distribute your donations.

Sayadaw U Indaka (the abbot of Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre in Yangon) has been very helpful in facilitating these personal connections. Before traveling to Thaleba we asked him to enquire how many children were not able to go to school in the two villages adjacent to Thaleba. In Kyaukgone, across the Mu River, there are four kids and in Sabardwin (the native village of Thamanay Kyaw, a Sayadaw who is a close friend of Sayadaw U Indaka, and one of Daw Virañani's teachers) there are fourteen children whose parents are too poor to send them to school.

In both villages, we met with the school committee to ensure that the money is used properly. Sayadaw U Indaka explained the model used in Thaleba. The money of the Education Fund can also be borrowed as a loan by the villagers, who instead of the high interest rates demanded by village money lenders (at least five per cent or more), the villagers only need to pay three per cent interest. In this way, both parties profit: the villagers are not at the mercy of unscrupulous money-lenders and the money of the Education Fund grows.

In the village of Thaleba, it is Sayadaw U Sujana who manages the Education Fund. Sayadaw U Sujana grew up in Thaleba and started to go to school there. But because his parents were so poor, he could no longer attend classes after primary school even though he was a bright young kid eager to learn. Under great hardships and with a lot of struggling and determination he managed to finish high school and then study at the



**Sayadaw U Sujana**

university, graduating with a master's degree in library science. Later, he ordained as a monk and a couple of years ago he established his own monastery east of Mandalay at the foot of the Shan Hills.

When Sayadaw U Indaka asked him last year to be in charge of the Education Fund, he was very happy to do so because he personally knows what it means to be deprived of education. So several times per year he travels to Thaleba and hands out books, note-books, pens, pencils, or uniforms and makes sure that the necessary fees are paid.

His heartfelt wish and selfless effort to enable as many children as possible to get an education or to learn a skill became obvious to us from the following incident that he shared.

About ten years ago he visited a remote area near Putao, in Upper Burma. One day he was in a small and poor village where many people were not Buddhists and, as a result, had not been exposed to monks in the same way as it is usual in other parts of Burma. Usually, Burmese people know that monks can only eat what they have been offered, but most of the people in this area were not aware that Buddhist monks are not allowed to cook, or to eat after twelve noon. So on that day it was late and it looked as if nobody was going to offer food to Sayadaw U Sujana. But then a young girl who was about ten years old approached him and offered a simple meal.



Sayadaw U Sujana had never forgotten this simple act of generosity and was ever grateful to this girl. About two years ago he tried to find out whether that she was still living in that village and what she was doing. He actually managed to trace her, and out of gratitude for that one meal he offered her a training course in Mandalay to become a seamstress. Not so long ago she completed her training and returned to her village where she is now running a tailor shop.



**Some of the students at Sayadaw U Sujana's monastery listening to his explanations**

In his new monastery, Sayadaw U Sujana is supporting nine children from nearby villages. He offers them accommodation, food, and – most important – education because the parents are so poor that they do not have the necessary means to take good care of their children. Sayadaw told us that there are sixteen more kids in the villages nearby who cannot go to school and that he wants to support them in their education. We happily offered a donation to set up an Education Fund, contributed to a new and much needed well on the monastery compound, and offered school uniforms to the students.

## Daw Vathou



**Daw Vathou with her two grand children**

and still now he is unable to continue his work as a carpenter. The family now depends on the incomes of Daw Vathou's daughter and son-in-law which are just enough to keep them going. But it is not enough for anything else.

On a visit to her house we noticed that their bamboo hut is falling apart and would no longer keep them dry in the upcoming rainy season. Because Daw Vathou and her family had not been included in our 'house building and repairing project' last year, we decided to offer them enough to build a new bamboo house.

Daw Vathou is a volunteer helper at CMMC. She works in the kitchen cooking for the foreign meditators and for Sayadaw. Many foreigners have come to appreciate her cooking, as it is not as spicy and oily as Burmese food normally is. She does her work with great dedication and is eager to provide good nutritious food to those who come to practise meditation from far away.

Last year her husband had an accident and damaged his ankle. The recovery took a long time



**The new house is under construction in front: the little open platform**



**The two kids playing in the unfinished house**

The joy and surprise were great when we gave the donation to her! For us the cost seemed quite inexpensive for an entire house (the equivalent of only about 450 US\$), but for this family, it is a small fortune. Her husband organised the building materials and hired a worker for the construction of their new home. After most of the old structure had been pulled

down and the new one was not yet up, the whole family had to sleep on a little open platform right next to the dusty street for a couple of nights. But now they enjoy their new and more spacious home.



**The new house from behind**

## The Old Couple

Last year we told you about the old couple living near CMMC (see Metta In Action Update "Home – Sweet Home"). U Pi Nan and Daw Nan Aye Kyi are still relatively healthy in spite of their 'handicaps': U Pi Nan's eye-sight is not good, and Daw Nan Aye Kyi is almost deaf. But the 75-year-old grandmother still grows her plants and sells them at the market. Her meagre income is far from being enough to pay for the rent of the land they live on, their daily food, and other expenses. Unlike most elders in Burma, the old couple is not supported by children; but they are lucky that the neighbours take care of them, giving them some rice, curries, washing powder, or a new blouse.

However, to come up for the monthly rent of the land is a big challenge for this couple (in Burma, many people just rent the land and then have to build their own house). In order to take this burden from them, we offered to pay for it a second time.

On an appointed day we met their land-lady at the old couple's bamboo house and gave her the rent for another year. This was witnessed by many of the neighbours who poked in their heads through the door to watch the proceedings. This is not uncommon or impolite in Burma; the houses are always open and any visitor or neighbour can come in. There is no sense of privacy as we have in the West!

It was obvious that all the neighbours were very happy on behalf of the old couple. They do as much as they can but are glad and relieved when others contribute to keep 'grandma' and 'grandpa' going.



**U Pi Nan tries to form a smile on his wife's face**  
On the table: small offerings to the old couple, including a solar lamp

## Happy Heaven Humanitarian Project



HHHP is another project that we have supported in the past years (HHHP stands for Happy Heaven Humanitarian Project). It is a hostel for children who are HIV positive, established in 2005. At present there are 73 children, 33 boys and 40 girls. The youngest of these is just one year and three months old, and the oldest is seventeen.

HHHP makes sure that these children get appropriate medical care and the antiretroviral medications they need to survive. They get these medications mostly from foreign NGOs, but also from the Burmese government.

The children are also given an education. The older ones who are in 5<sup>th</sup> standard or higher go out to attend a regular school, and the younger ones are taught by four teachers in a classroom at the hostel.

The oldest of these children is a 17-year-old boy who is not interested in further education. So the caretakers have arranged a job for him. The boy runs a little library where people can borrow books and magazines. On top of this, the HHHP people have also organised a place for him to stay. If he does not earn enough for his living, HHHP will support him with rice and other daily necessities. And most important of all, he will continue to get medical support and treatment from HHHP.



This boy is the first kid to enter adulthood since the opening of HHHP. When more kids grow up and finish school (or do not want to go to school anymore), HHHP intends to arrange vocational training and a place to stay, as well as to continue their medical support.

The hostel is in the township of North Dagon, a remote and slightly 'wild' part of Yangon. We visited on a Sunday, so there were many kids playing in the courtyard. They were smiling and seemed to be very joyful. The secretary of HHHP is also a doctor and she comes almost every day to check on the kids. If a child needs medical treatment, she takes them to a nearby doctor or to a hospital.



**The school teacher with some of her young students**



**The boy with his 'crown' is waiting for Ven. Virañani to take a picture**

U Myint Aung, the president of HHHP, told us that some of the children are now becoming adolescent and so the sexual energy between the boys and the girls can become a problem. Therefore, separate living quarters for boys and girls are needed. But there is no space on the existing land to build separate rooms and it is not possible to build another storey on the existing building because the foundations are too weak. They are in a dilemma...

## **Helping Hands**

To enable as many kids as possible to go to school, this year once again we supported the Helping Hands project established by a Canadian school teacher in Yangon. When Glen noticed that some kids living in his neighbourhood did not attend school, he wanted to know the reasons. He soon learned that many poor families cannot afford to get their children even a basic education because the 'hidden costs' are too high. Although the government schools are supposed to be free, parents need to buy the uniforms, note-books, or pens. In addition, students also need to pay for various things that in most places are provided free of cost. For example, the generator at school can only be used when the students pay for the diesel to run it.

With the help of Burmese volunteers who look out for kids living in the streets instead of sitting in a classroom, Helping Hands supports poor children from all parts of Yangon to attend school. Over the years the number of kids supported each year by Helping Hands has grown to



over one thousand. This year Helping Hands also intends to support a few ‘key’ monastic schools where there is great need and great potential benefit.



In this way, children get an opportunity for education enabling them to make more out of their lives. How it will benefit them and what good they will bring to the world, we do not know. But what moves us and many others – like Sayadaw U Sujana and Glen – is the knowledge that the help we offer now will later flow out into the world in ways that we would never be able to imagine. Sayadaw U Sujana’s life story is a wonderful example of what can happen when a kid gets a miraculous chance – appreciating the gift and value of education, he works tirelessly to offer the same chance to others.

And likewise, the lives of the old couple, the kids from HHHP, and Daw Vathou’s family have been positively changed through the combined effort of good-hearted people – and you are one of them!

With metta  
Ariya Ñani



**At the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon**