

## *“Metta is the Strongest Thing”*



### *Support for Monastery Schools*

At a visit to an English-language school in Yangon last year, I had learned of a poor monastic school not far from HHHP, where we regularly go to offer donations. Making enquiries to Glen (of Helping Hands, see MiA update “The Knowledge Pot of Gold”), we learned that this school was in fact both deserving and quite underfunded. What we were not prepared for was the abject poverty of the village surrounding the school. As we approached the monastery we could see that the people here were poorer than any we had seen before. The village sits in a swampy area on the far Eastern fringe of Yangon, and the monastery and school are surrounded by small bamboo huts perched on stilts over fetid mosquito-infested water. Even the taxi driver was shaking his head and saying “They’re *so* poor!” And at the end of the dirt road there were the gates of the monastery; we could see it was rough, but that at the far end of the compound there was a tidy and serviceable school building.

Inside we were greeted by the abbot of the monastery, U Indaka. He told us he had a Dhammacariya degree (an advanced degree in Buddhism, entitling him to teach at a study monastery), but that he’d come here with the intention of helping poor people. And as he walked through the village for alms every day, he noticed that there were often kids sitting on the side of

the road. When he asked why they did not go to school, the kids told him that their parents did not have any money. So he decided to open a school in his 1.5 acre compound.

He started with nothing. First a bamboo building was destroyed by Nargis, and then thieves stole the materials. After that some donors offered a tent. Slowly, with monk labor and local donors, he has built the school up.

Now there are 20 monks and 22 novices living at the monastery, and the school has over 100 students (novices, girls, and boys). The novices are either orphans or from very poor local families and stay at the monastery. The school goes from Kindergarten up to 4<sup>th</sup> standard, and from what he receives, U Indaka supports kids who go to 5<sup>th</sup> or higher standards at the local government school.



**The full classroom at Ananda Metta School**

In the tidy and well-kept classroom building we watched as the teachers were offering lessons, and when the school day finished, the students filed out, some going home, others staying to help fill the water pots or sweep the grounds.

As the school is the most important priority for U Indaka, living conditions for the monks and novices are very difficult. As he showed us around we were struck by the difficult conditions that these monks cheerfully endure. In the rainy season, both the living quarters and the dining hall can flood to almost knee depth, and illness is common. But in spite of these challenges, the school stays open and he

does what he can to share in other ways—for example, because he has a well, he is able to offer good drinking water to everyone in the neighbourhood.

Not long after our visit to Ananda Metta School, we learned from U Suvira (the monk in CMMC who is in charge of the office) about Aung Yatanar Shwe Oh Monastery and School in Bago. He told us that over 80 children attend this school, many of whom are from very poor Indian families living nearby. Because most of the families are so poor, many of the children had never even had school uniforms. U Indobhasa, who is the abbot of this monastery, made the journey to Yangon to show us photos of the school, and to tell us about it. He started the school in 2004 in answer to the obvious need in the community. Now there is an obvious need to expand and he had begun to build a brick building. But because he was struggling to support both the monastery and the school, he had not been able to finish it. He showed us the plans for the new building and said that he hoped to be able to finish the roof in time for the onset of the rainy season. We happily offered a donation for this, as well as 100 uniforms for the children. A few days later he returned to CMMC, and with a huge beaming smile showed us photos of the children with their new uniforms. This had been an *event* for these kids, for the first time ever wearing their school uniforms!



**Students at Aung Yatanar Shwe Oh School proudly show off their new uniforms.**

### *Support for Nunnery Schools*

Nunnery schools were a particular focus of our efforts this year. When we first started to offer regular donations to nuns, we were responding simply to their immediate needs and could not have imagined at the time that our activities would expand as they have!



Returning home from School

But now 5 years on, we see more and more how our initial small donations have resulted in big benefits to these nuns and to the communities that they serve—and how these benefits are beginning to ripple out into the world in ways that we could never have imagined.

Over the last few years we have had the wonderful opportunity and privilege to be able to assist in the founding of two new nunnery schools. Watching these schools grow and thrive has been a great source of joy and inspiration to all of us. Often now, the head nuns of other nunneries and people in the village tell us that they send their children to one or the other of these schools. More and more we learn of how your donations have touched lives far from the point of the original offering.

Last year, in 2010-2011, we offered donations to 3 nunnery schools (the 2 that we helped by offering start-up donations, and a third that had started in the immediate wake of Cyclone Nargis). This year, realizing the great benefit of these schools to the communities around them, we wanted to expand our efforts in this area.

We knew there must be other nunnery schools in our area of Yangon but other than vague word of mouth rumors we had no information about them.

We learned of our first new school, Sukhagami Nunnery and School, through one of the monks at CMMC, who had a friend with a monastery across the road from this school. Daw Aggañani, the abbess of the nunnery and founder of the school, had frequently helped him, and he had come to admire her efforts on behalf of the village children. We visited the school late one afternoon, a day before a ceremony celebrating Daw Aggañani's birthday. Daw Aggañani told us that she had initially had no plans to set up a school when she moved here with 50 nuns in 2002. At first, she sent her young nuns to a nearby school to get their basic worldly education. But in 2008, she established her own free school, not only for her nuns but also for poor children in the neighbourhood. In 2011, a Japanese donor had built a new large 2-storey school building. Now 542 children—nuns, novices, girls, and boys—attend this large and well-run school. We had arrived in time to get a tour of the new school building before the nun students were finished for the day, and were very surprised to see the students all sitting cross-legged on their desks, diligently meditating! This is the routine at the end of the day, the last thing the students do before they go home; Daw Aggañani had ordained and practiced at Mahasi Meditation Centre and deeply understands the value and importance of meditation practice!



Some moments of quiet at the end of the school day.

We knew that there must be other schools in the area around CMMC, since there is a high density of nunneries here. In order to find out, we visited Daw Tikkhacari, the 'Head Nun' in Mingaladon Township (the Township where CMMC is located). For years we had known of the



A warm welcome from Daw Tikkhacari (L)

existence of this ‘Head Nun’ but this was our first opportunity to visit her. We found her at her nunnery down the highway from CMMC, which was tucked behind a pagoda, and shaded by ancient trees. There was a large pet sheep peacefully grazing in the compound (the nuns had saved her from slaughter), and the trees are the daytime resting place of many large fruit-eating bats. It was immediately obvious that this was a place imbued with *mettā*! It turned out that Daw Tikkhacari had also heard of *us*, and of the work of Metta in Action, so she was very happy to give us information about 4 other nunnery schools, as well as the names of other nunneries that were worthy of support. Before we left, the talk turned to Dhamma. Daw Tikkhacari (who is now starting her second elected 4-year term as Head Nun) confessed that what she *really* wanted to do was to do more meditation so as to prepare for death. Her words were another vivid example to us of how many monastics in Burma put aside their own dreams in order to live lives dedicated to the service of others.

The title of ‘Head Nun’ doesn’t confer any special advantage—still there is the weekly effort to collect alms, and the 45 nuns at her nunnery sometimes do not get enough to eat this way, and have to make do with what they have. So we gratefully made an offering to Daw Tikkhacari’s nunnery, then left in search of the other nunnery schools she had told us about.

We had street names, but of course no numbers (this is Burma!), and it was a bit of an adventure to find these places. Fortunately we were ably assisted by our friend U Kyaw Moe, a taxi driver from the area who often drives us to many of our *dāna* appointments. His knowledge was essential: none of these schools is ‘on the beaten track’!

We first found at Myasingi Nunnery Education School. When we drove into the sizeable compound, we could see that this was one of the biggest and most well-organized schools we had visited. It was established in 1999, and now has almost 750 students; 100 nuns live here, as well as 50 resident teachers and boarding students. The abbess, Daw Silavati, ordained when she was 13, training at a study nunnery in Yangon and then practicing in a few different Burmese meditative traditions. She had initially come



A class at Myasingi Nunnery School

intending just to start a study nunnery, but her quiet life was changed by a ‘Theravada study course’ in 1994 that opened her eyes to the larger world. Since then, she has become increasingly involved in helping others—no longer only concerned about her own success in studies or practice. First she did courses in health care and social work, and now she is studying nursing—all while running and supervising the school. In recognition of her many contributions she has received the formal title of ‘Saddhammajotika’ (‘Illuminator of the true Dhamma’).

She says she can do all this because she has many local donors and a very reliable team of the resident nuns and teachers. All the teachers are volunteers, although Daw Silavati gives them a ‘goodwill offering’ each month that is equivalent to the salary that teachers get elsewhere. They



Safe and sound at Myasingi School

are very well organized, and each teacher and the older nuns take on a share of the responsibility for taking care of the younger children, running the school, and keeping it tidy. We could see this in action while we were speaking with Daw Silavati. There was a little girl with her who was being cared for by some of the other nuns, and Daw Silavati explained to us that the child had been brought to the nunnery at 7 months old and would have died had she not come here. Now at a little over 2 years old, she is happy, healthy, and obviously adored by everyone.

When we toured the school, we were impressed by the orderliness and tidiness of the classrooms and of the compound—there were even rubbish bins in the schoolyard (quite a rarity in Burma!). We visited each of the classrooms and were introduced to the students, from the adorable kindergarteners, up to the hard-working 10<sup>th</sup> standard

students. There were a number of well-constructed classroom buildings in the compound, but because there are so many students some of the upper grades have to use the smoky kitchen as a classroom! Daw Silavati said she hopes that a new 2-story classroom building that is under construction will make it possible for these students to study in a healthier environment.



Neat and tidy!

Next we went a few bus-stops up the main road towards CMMC, and down another long side road to Sanmya Thitar Nunnery and School. We were met by Daw Ayesingi, who runs the school together with the head nun, Daw Khemayee, who was away doing a meditation retreat. The nunnery was founded in 2001, and the school in 2006. These two nuns had come with the intention to start their own study nunnery, but soon found that many of the children who they'd ordained had no basic education at all. So they first had to teach them how to read and write. When the word got out that they were doing this, children began to come from the village--first 20 day students then many more. So the nuns decided to start the school. Now there are 110 nuns and 50 lay kids who study here.

All the resident nuns (except the ones studying for their 10<sup>th</sup> Standard exams) must go out on almsround to provide the food for the nunnery but it's not always enough. So they eat very simply: rice and vegetables, with no meat. But of course, there were no complaints about this—



The 10<sup>th</sup> Standard English class at Santisukha School

as is usual in Burma, the nuns take the practice of contentment with what is to great heights, accepting what they have gracefully and with great patience. And after we offered a donation for the school, we were treated to one of the most ear-shattering blessings any of us had ever witnessed—over 100 nuns chanting loudly and in perfect unison! Obviously the standard of learning is very high here.

Our last intended stop for the day was to Santisukha Nunnery and School. But we found that it was on the other side of a blocked road: a new subdivision for the Yangon super-rich had sprouted up, and the road for locals was simply walled off, with no obvious

way around. With daylight fading, we had to give up and it was almost a month before we could return to find our way around the obstruction.

What we found when we got there was well worth the trouble. Daw Sirichanda had founded this nunnery and school 8 years ago, and now there are over 300 students, including 98 resident nuns. Many of the classes were held in the nunnery buildings, or in a building offered by the German Embassy in 2008 after Cyclone Nargis. Across the street, there were two brand new buildings that had just been finished. In the new classrooms, the oldest students were studying English or intently studying for their 10<sup>th</sup> Standard exams (we could feel an intense energy in that room—the results of exams determine a student’s future and were at the time only weeks away!)



Working hard and joyfully!!

Adjacent to the main building Daw Sirichanda showed us a free medical clinic that she runs for the students and people from the village. Like the Metta Clinic at CMMC, her clinic is open one day each week and is free of charge, depending on volunteer doctors and donations to cover the cost of medicines.

Like the nuns at all the other schools, the operating expenses for the school and clinic are supported completely by donations and by what the resident nuns manage to get on their almsrounds. This and a number of other nunnery schools rely on grants from a local pharmaceutical company (called ‘Shine Hope’) for the teachers’ salaries.

Of course the ‘old’ nunnery schools that we had supported in previous years were also on our ‘dāna radar screen’, and we were particularly delighted to visit and make offerings. In association with the Myanmar Schools Project, I had been able to visit 2 of these schools in November 2011 (see December 2011 update), but surprises were still in store for us.



Daw Ayesingi’s big surprise!

In the middle of January, we received a telephone call from Daw Ayesingi, the abbess of Zaloon Parahita Nunnery and School. She invited us to come up because she had a ‘matter’ to discuss—we didn’t know it but we were about to have very big surprise! When we drove up to the gate of the school, our jaws dropped—where the bamboo one-room school building had stood, there was the ground floor of a 2-storey brick building being built, and across the street on a new piece of land there were new temporary school buildings and toilets. Some Japanese donors had ‘discovered’ the school and had offered the cost of the ground floor

of the new building, hiring the workers and overseeing and all the construction! For us, this was a wonderful affirmation of all that this school has contributed to the community since it was started just three and a half years ago.

Daw Ayesingi, reflecting on the journey in the last years, and the endless work that she has had to do to make this school a success said, “I am devoting my life for the good of the *sāsana* (the dispensation of the Buddha). Before my mind was filled with worry and restlessness, but now my heart & mind are at peace; *mettā* is the strongest thing!”



Dressed up for the opening ceremony

The joy that can come from a life lived in the service of others was also expressed by Daw Sumanacari of Appamada Nunnery and School. Opened less than a year, the school already has almost 200 students, only in the younger grades—and she expects almost twice this number in the new school year that will start in June. When we visited in early January, the toilets and water tank that had been donated by the Myanmar Schools Project/Four Friends Group in November were already finished, and the students were eagerly using the desks that they had offered.

We made an offering for a generator that will allow the school to have running water in the afternoons

when there is no electricity. And we were also very glad to be able to support the head teacher, Daw Khin Khin Say, who badly needed surgery to remove a painful ovarian cyst but had been unable to afford the 500,000 Kyat (about \$600) to pay for it. She had been heroically teaching in great pain, and is clearly a wonderful asset to the school. After we made these donations, Daw Sumanacari was remembering how it had been before the school opened, saying, “I could not sleep and eat anymore. Now I can.”

Finally we were glad to once again support Daw Yuzana whose school for nuns and girls from poor families continues to grow and prosper. This year for the first time, there are students who are able to do correspondence studies at the university level. I was unexpectedly treated to the news of one of these students, the daughter of Daw Nilar, who at the time of Cyclone Nargis was a volunteer helper at CMMC. Her daughter had had a terrible workplace accident at a plastics factory where she had a summer job, losing part of her right hand. She was in despair because she was unable to return to school and faced a bleak future. Fortunately, that year Daw Yuzana had just started her school. So we set up a meeting, and Daw Yuzana was willing to ordain this gifted young woman and accepted her as one of the first resident nun students. We have had little contact with Daw Nilar recently, so in early March, I was happily surprised to get a visit from her. Now her daughter is happy and thriving as a nun: she had passed the 10<sup>th</sup> Standard exams and was finishing her first year of university studies!

When we made our offering to Daw Yuzana, it was the day before her birthday, and the monastery was humming with activity in advance of her personal offering (in Burma, people *give* on their birthdays, rather than *get*!). We asked what the school needed most and she said, laughing, “Everything!” But in spite of the constant effort it takes to keep it together, and to pay the monthly expenses, sometimes out of her own pocket, Daw Yuzana remains light and upbeat.

This year, she expressed a deep wish to have some quiet time and time to practice—while at the same time understanding that this is no longer possible: she has sacrificed her own personal desires for the welfare and benefit of many.

Every one of these schools is a wonderful gift to the communities around it. There is a deep hunger in these children for learning, and a desire to know about the wider world. Before this yearning was frustrated by poverty and a lack of opportunity; now the possibility of learning is there for them and they are grasping it eagerly with both hands! Every time we visit one of these schools, we are struck by the joy of the students and their eagerness to study.



Grabbing opportunity with both hands!

Though they are young, already life has not been easy for these kids—and they know all too well both the value of education and the lack of opportunity to get it!

So it was a very happy day in early February when we went to the official opening ceremony of the Appamada School. Such ceremonial occasions are very important in Burma, and if the money cannot be raised immediately, they may take place long after the school actually opens; in this case all expenses were paid by a local donor. Hundreds of people were there, including all the students in their brand new uniforms that had been offered in November by the Myanmar Schools Project. The school was full of life, and full of the all the potential that the students' young lives hold.

On that day we could not help reflecting about all the seeds that have been planted by your support of this school, and of all the other monastic schools. Your gifts have touched so many young lives—altogether over 2600 students go to these monastic schools! Who knows where all these youngsters will go? Who knows what they will contribute to their communities in the future?? The gifts of their lives are no longer locked up by a lack of learning--now through education, they will be able to contribute in uncountable ways to the lives of others.

Times are changing fast in Burma these days, and each of these children will be part of the future of this beautiful country. Thanks to the endless work of the nuns and monks, and to your generous support of them—through this *mettā* in action that we are *all* doing—there is hope that the future will be transformed. Daw Ayesingi could not have said it better: truly, *mettā* is the strongest thing!



May all beings be well, happy and peaceful!  
With *mettā*,  
Virañani