

*“We have never received so much!”*



Times are changing in Burma. Every day there are new stories in the news—stories of elections, stories of sanctions being lifted, stories of a booming tourist market and of the global race to get a piece of what has been described as ‘South-east Asia’s last economic frontier’.

As Burma opens up and relations with the rest of the world begin to ‘normalize’, there are concerns that change of a darker sort will creep in—that poor young Burmese women may increasingly become victims of a burgeoning sex trade as has happened in neighboring Thailand.

In Burma, however, poor young women have many potential places of refuge: a largely invisible but immensely important ‘social safety net’ formed by the thousands of nunneries scattered throughout the country. Even first-time visitors to Burma cannot help but notice the many nuns at popular tourist sites such as the Shwedagon Pagoda or Pagan. According to the Ministry for Religious Affairs, there are around 20,000 nuns in Burma—though their actual number may be several times higher.

Dressed in the distinctive pink, orange, and saffron-colored robes unique to Burma, these nuns inherit a lineage of Buddhist practice and study that goes back many centuries. But nunneries are more than places of Dhamma practice and study: they are also informal orphanages: places of



A nun visiting the Shwedagon Pagoda

refuge for orphans, girls from poor families, and for those who are from villages so remote that education is impossible.

Each nunnery has an abbess and varying numbers of other nuns, some as young as three or four years old. Many of the young nuns will remain nuns their entire lives, but some will eventually return to lay life, marry and raise their own families—having received refuge, an education, and a caring upbringing.

In Mingaladon township (where we are based at the Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre), there are over 250 nunneries and a total population of over 2500 nuns. This density of nunneries is by no means unusual—many

nuns have chosen to settle in the exurbs that surround Yangon because land has been affordable (although this is now no longer the case!) and

because it is easy to get into the city for their twice-weekly almsrounds.

When we first started to offer regular donations to nuns in the wake of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, we were unaware of any of this and were responding simply to the urgent needs of a few nunneries in our immediate vicinity. At the time, we could not have imagined that our activities would expand as they have!

Now five years on, we make offerings to 32 nunneries (a total of almost 1100 nuns) in Mingaladon Township, Sagaing, and in the West Coast town of Sittwe. And we are beginning to see clearly how our yearly offerings have little by little added up to mean big gains for these wonderful women, and for the all the kids that they support.

For the nunneries we have been supporting since 2008-9, there is a big difference in their lives and living conditions that has been the direct result of your donations. Universally, there is more space, better hygiene, and more healthy living conditions.

These improvements have usually been incremental, happening over a period of years—so it's hard to notice how dramatic the changes are. It's only when looking at before and after photos that the magnitude of the shift becomes apparent.



The kitchen, 'before'....

When we first met the Mingalagonwei nuns, there were only 5 nuns living in a small bamboo hut. Little by little with your help there has been immense improvement here. In 2008, the Mingalagonwei Nunnery had no proper kitchen, no water except from a shallow well, no shower area, and only flimsy bamboo toilets. Now there are all of these things—a kitchen with a concrete floor and adequate ventilation, a proper wood-floored dining area, a main building that will eventually be completely built of brick (now only the ground floor walls are finished), proper toilets, and a deep well that provides

running water. All of this has meant immense work for the nuns, but there is cheer amidst

the tiredness—they live amongst these changes, so they notice them many moments of each day, and never take them for granted!

When we asked Daw Obhasa what was now needed most, we were surprised when she told us that they badly needed a new bridge. She



...and after!

explained that to actually build anything substantial, they needed a proper bridge that vehicles could drive over. Our very first offering to this nunnery in 2008 had been a wooden footbridge to replace the one that had washed out during cyclone Nargis. So now it felt as though we had all come ‘full circle’—and were embarking on a whole new round of the journey! Daw Obhasa had been able to find most of the support for the construction of a new bridge from adjoining landowners, and added our dāna to complete the necessary fund. In March, we were happy to see that the old bridge had been moved aside, and the new one was under construction.



The building in 2008...

At Sasanasukhacari Laputta Nunnery, there has also been a profound transformation, and it’s a transformation that is still very much underway. After Cylcone Nargis, there were 11 nuns living here, all together in one very tiny bamboo building. The storm had almost blown the house down, and it was still listing and leaking badly. The kitchen was a shambles, and the toilets were totally inadequate. Each year, the nuns here have transformed your dāna to the nunnery into something important and useful—toilets, a new kitchen, a new addition. Now, the original bamboo house is gone, and they have embarked on the most ambitious project so far: the construction of a 2-story brick building that will serve them for many many years to come. It will take quite a while to finish, but the dāna we offered them this year will build a sturdy roof that will be finished in time for the rains.

When we visited the Sasanasukhacari Laputta Nunnery in early February, we were touched by Daw Uttara’s description of all the events of the last year—the challenges and the joys of living as they do. She relayed a wonderful story of a Malaysian donor who had offered robes to all the nuns at this nunnery. Daw Uttara was happy, because with every extra bit of cash going for construction work, that left little for clothes, so they try to wear the robes until they are falling apart. But at the same time she felt sad—because she knew that other nuns living nearby did not get any robes. So she told the donors about the many other nuns in the area, and as a result 150 of them were offered robes. Daw Uttara said, “I do not have the money to do such an offering, but I have a mouth that I can use [to instigate the donation].” She said she was inspired in this by the work that we do all do together at Metta In Action!



...And in March 2011

*Living in ‘The Zone’—the Construction Zone, that is!*

This year it wasn’t only these two nunneries; many of the other nunneries we visited also were in the midst of large and long-term construction projects. Often these projects are completed bit by bit as the dāna comes in—houses are built wall by wall, while the nuns cheerfully live amongst the piles of construction debris.



Soon to be made redundant!

The nuns at Mya Thita Oo and Chanmyavati nunneries have been doing this for 3 years now, and gradually their buildings are coming closer to completion. We went to Chanmyavati Nunnery to make our offering when they were in the midst of their annual 4-day recitation of the Patthana, held every year in January. Just a few days before, a local sponsor from Yangon had offered the Buddha shrine room in the new building. We were happy to see this spacious

structure near completion, and being used! But even with the new accommodation building, there is still much room for improvement. When we asked Daw Paññasiri (the abbess) what the most urgent needs now were, she first spoke about the urgent need for books that the nuns can properly study for their exams. Then she showed us around the back of the compound to the aging toilet block, saying that there was need for better toilets, too! So we were pleased to be able to make a contribution for both these things—the refined and the very basic needs!

We noticed many young Jackfruit and Mango trees in the compound, and Daw Paññasiri told us they wanted to have their own source of fruit to supplement the rather spartan diet that comes from what they receive during the weekly almsrounds. She said, “We eat what we get – it has to be enough!”

At Mya Thita Oo Nunnery, even before going into the compound we could see that a lot was happening there! A whole new roofline is visible from the lane, and the nuns proudly showed us the new second floor they are finally able to add to their building. Inside, there was a jungle-gym of construction scaffolding and workers were busy slapping concrete onto one of the second-floor walls. Now there is a concrete floor downstairs and a separate area that they use as a dining area and for sleeping. Out back, amidst the beautifully tended vegetable garden, we saw the new pump and finished toilets that we had offered last year. The nuns live very close to nature here, but Daw Sucari told us that snakes do not bother them anymore. She instructed the other nuns not to kill them, but just chase them away.



A second floor for the Mya Thita Oo Nuns!



Early days: 2009

One of the most dramatic changes of all has been right on our back doorstep, at Sasanaramsi Nunnery, next to CMMC. We had begun to notice the sound of hammering coming from over there in late December, and so we visited to see what they were up to. What we found was that the bamboo half of the original building had been torn down and a whole new structure was growing in its place! The new building was mainly sponsored by a local couple from Yangon (with other sponsors); they have promised to give enough to complete the new building and will also sponsor a

separate new building where English classes will be held.

We offered these nuns enough to build a permanent kitchen, and were astounded when we went back a few weeks later to see that much had already been done—and that they had had enough to also build an extra toilet block as well! The entire compound was taken up by construction related activity and piles of wood or bricks or sand. But life goes on, and study and practice go on in spite of all the clutter! Often we see young nuns from here



Inside the new kitchen



And now, March 2012

returning home from school (they go to either Appamada or Zaloon Parahita Schools). And every morning and every night without the yogis at CMMC hear the sound of the bell from next door, followed by the vigorous and energetic chanting of the 50 nuns who now take refuge here! When we first met them there were only a handful of nuns and a bare piece of land—and now there is a thriving nunnery!

We never hear anyone complaining about the challenges and inconveniences of living in construction zones as these nuns are! We might forget, but the nuns

remember all too well what the alternative is, and what it is like trying to live in small huts and with unhygienic conditions. They are thrilled to have such an improvement to their lives, regardless of temporary inconveniences!

### *More Support Equals More Nuns*

The regular support has also allowed the nuns to expand their work, sometimes dramatically (see 2012 Metta in Action Update Number 4; “Metta is the Strongest Thing” for a description of what has happened at Zaloon Parahita and Appamada Nunneries). However, even without opening schools, regular support makes it possible for nunneries to take in more kids, and to expand the amount of good that they do in the world.



Part of the growing census at Chanmay Thayar,

One of the most dramatic examples of this is Sasanaramsi nunnery, which has more than tripled in size since we first offered a donation so they could build their first building in 2009. At Chanmyay Thayar Nunnery, there has also been a steady increase in numbers, up from 25 in 2010 to 35 now.

Others nunneries may have more modest increases, but even small increases in numbers mean a huge individual difference for the 1, 3, or 5 more children who are now sheltered, clothed, fed, and educated.



A big accomplishment !

Another benefit of receiving ongoing support is that the nuns are freed from concern about bare sustenance, and so they can then use their energies towards study and practice. This year, when we went up to the village of Nwe Kwe to make offerings, we were treated to a wonderful example of this at Paññayaungkyi Nunnery. Our previous dāna offerings to Paññayaungkyi had been used to build the kitchen, toilets, downstairs walls, and to fix the well. So things were going smoothly, and the nuns were able to study successfully. Altogether 7 nuns in Nwe Kwe village are studying for the Dhammacariya Exam together; 2 of them are from Paññayaungkyi. These nuns had just passed a big Abhidhamma exam, and shyly posed with their certificates.

### *New Nunneries*

We offered support to several new nunneries this year. The biggest of these is Paññasingi Nunnery, with 80 nuns and 2 adopted boys. Most of these nuns are from the Upper Myanmar, and are many different ethnic groups including Padaung, PaO, Kayin, and Shan. The compound was busy but neat and tidy, dominated by a large new building that was mostly finished but still under construction. The abbess, Daw Paññasiri, told us that the young nuns were going to Zaloon Parahita School. We learned that their parents are farmers, and send the girls to the nunnery in Yangon because in their home village there’s no opportunity to get an education. So during the holidays, the village Sayadaw brings them back to the village so they can have time with their family.



Ariya Ñani and Virañani with some of the Paññasingi nuns

We had met the nuns at Dhammarama Nunnery in



**Deluxe new toilets built with your dāna!**

November; they had recently arrived in the neighbourhood, intending to take in other nuns. We were immediately impressed with the beautiful compound. Although the buildings were rough bamboo, the garden was perfectly planted and obviously lovingly tended. In addition they had a well, and a covered shower area, but only 2 crummy toilets—so we offered enough dāna in January to build good toilets. By early March, the toilets were already finished and almost completely concealed by an arbor of gourd vines that the nuns had planted in front of them! Daw Issariyañani, the abbess, told us “It is hard work!” But they are determined to establish a long lasting nunnery, and to do work to support others, and to share the Buddha’s teachings.

We learned that they get drinking water from the neighbouring place, Sadhamma Sitagu Nunnery—so went over to check it out. We found it to be similar—a small bamboo nunnery building, with a good well, and a very neat garden. The nuns here have dreams of someday having a 2-story concrete building to replace the rustic structure they now inhabit. They know it will take time, but they are patient!

Not far away from Paññasingi Nunnery is the much smaller Seinyaungkyi Nunnery. This was to be the last offering of the year, but it proved to be the most moving. We had heard about this nunnery from Daw Janesi, one of the nuns at CMMC; she had learned about it because one of the young nuns there was from her village. So one afternoon we took off to find the nunnery, but had to drive around in circles for quite a while before we finally we found it, tucked down a very narrow lane. On the far end of the very tidy compound was a bamboo house. We could see that even though the house was very rustic, already there was a good well and proper toilets. Inside we were introduced to Daw Sirichanda, who together with her friend Daw



**The work of many years: the compound at Seinyaunkyi**

Singi came here 2 years ago. Together these nuns have 60 years in robes, even though they are each only in their late 30s! Before they were here, they lived in Yangon together at a study nunnery, and specifically came here to do sāsana work, to take in poor kids. There are three young nuns who have recently ordained, and a monk from the Shan State wants to send more girls here. One of the youngsters is Ma Sucari, who is 8 years old; her mother died and she doesn’t know her father. She has a younger sister in a nunnery in Monywa (in Upper Myanmar). When we asked if she was sad or homesick, she said that she’s happy here and doesn’t want to go back to her village. The elder nuns told us that she loves school and is very clever!



**Ma Sucari (L) and the other young nuns shyly posing for our camera!**

As we offered your dāna, the nuns chanted the traditional blessing and sharing of merit—except that Daw Sirichanda and Daw Singi were so deeply moved (weeping openly) that they were barely able to chant. We were close to tears too! To publicly show deep emotion like this is a rare thing in Burma. To explain, Daw Sirichanda told us that the two of them had been saving tiny amounts of money from their almsrounds for many many years to buy the land and build the buildings. She said, “Until today, we have never ever in our lives received so much support as this!”

It would take multiple updates to give you news of each one of the nunneries we now support, so we will have to let a few more pictures tell the stories of our many visits:



There is much joy that comes in sharing the stories of these remarkable women with you. When we offer your dāna to the nuns, one nunnery at a time, we don't get much of a sense of the magnitude of what we all do together with this Metta In Action work. But this year there was a special opportunity to see many of the nuns we know together in one place. In honor of her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2011, Ariya Ñani made a personal donation to 250 of the nuns we know—she invited them to come to a meal she had donated at CMMC (for either breakfast or lunch) and then afterwards each nun received a shoulder bag with many useful goodies inside. For each of the three offerings, when everyone came together, the beautiful sea of pink robes was a deeply moving sight. For once we could get a fuller sense of the magnitude of goodness that your dāna supports, and the great potential that is held in the many young lives that are touched by your generosity. There is no stopping the force of this goodness as it ripples out into the world!



So may the merit of this goodness—and of *all* the goodness of our 2011-2012 projects—be dedicated for the benefit of all beings. May all beings everywhere be well, happy and peaceful!  
Thank you so much for your unfailing and very generous support

Virañani  
April 30, 2012