

HOW I WISH YOU ALL WERE HERE!

Although Burma has disappeared from the news the situation is far from being good. Many victims of the cyclone Nargis are still struggling to get their lives together and the political situation is as tight as before. Daw Virañani has continued to be active and compassionately organized many more dānas to those in need. Here is a summary of what has been done during the past month.



*Daw Virañani with nuns from Sasana Sukhacari
Laputta Nunnery*

In July, we had been offering support to three nunneries near CMMC (Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre) and SOM (Shwe Oo Min Meditation Centre). As time was limited during my one-week stay in Burma, we had no time to find and contact all the other nunneries in the area. In the meantime, Daw Virañani has contacted several more nunneries which are equally poor and depend on support. With the remaining funds from your donations in May and June, we offered 800'000 kyats to Sasana Sukhacari Laputta Nunnery and 100'000 kyats to Mettagonyei Nunnery, and we contributed 43'500 kyats to an offering done by Walter Köchli and his friends to five nunneries in the

area. This dāna to the five nunneries was an offering of rice because the nuns have difficulties to get enough support when they go into town to collect alms.

The donation to Mettagonyei Nunnery was given with the specific purpose to build a bridge that replaces a thin wooden board over the creek.

Later Daw Virañani heard that there are one thousand five hundred nunneries in Mingaladon township! This was actually confirmed by Daw Nilar who said that 'Mingaladon is a nuns'village'! She said that most of the villages she had been to in the delta through Mahāgandhayon Monastery do not have nunneries, though the bigger towns in the delta may have 'yeikthas' (centres) for nuns. This partly explains the high number of nunneries around Yangon.



The new bridge leading to Mettagonyei Nunnery

Ma Uttamasingi and Ma Uttarasingi in the Sasana Sukhacari Laputta Nunnery are two of the four adult nuns. When Daw Virañani visited the nunnery, she met with these two sisters and five very young nuns, ranging from four years old to ten years old. Four of them were orphans. In Daw Virañani's words, "When they chanted for us (soooo beautifully!), the child who was not an orphan began to weep - just quiet tears as she was chanting. And the whole time she looked very sad. I couldn't help but wonder why the tears - and what her life has been like. Also the father of the two sisters was there, a quiet presence. The sisters lost a brother and his family in the cyclone, and Ma Uttamasingi hurt her back holding on to a tree.

But even with all the sad stories, the little place has such a sweet feel, not at all heavy. Yes, life has dealt these people some heavy blows - and they're very poor so their robes are threadbare, the roof



In the class room at Sasana Sukhacari Laputta Nunnery

leaks, and food is sometimes in short supply. But I neither heard nor felt the least attitude of complaint. Life goes on! There's a blackboard in the room and each time I've been there, it's had different lessons - today Pāḷi verb conjugations in Roman and Myanmar letters, and the two times before it was different English lessons.

When they received the eight lakhs we offered, the joy in the room was palpable, and there were even some overt smiles to go with the happy eyes! I'd brought some tamarind toffees for the kids, and they (like children everywhere) found these much more interesting than the boring bundle of cash! But when the adults quietly put the candies away for later, there wasn't so much as a single sigh. It's clear that these little ones have had to learn equanimity at an early age."

With these offerings, the dāna-box was finally empty! Your generous donations have been incredibly useful and the condition of many people's life has been significantly improved. May you rejoice in your goodness and generosity and derive much happiness and joy!

In an email to me, Daw Virañani wrote, "I struggle with the words, they seem to paint such a pale picture of what it was like to be there in the midst of these beautiful women [nuns], and to see their gratitude first-hand. If there's one thing that brings up craving in all this, it's the wish to give you as vivid a feeling as I can - to bring you and everyone else through you into the picture. How I wish you all were here - because I know you'd be so happy!"

Recently, Daw Nilar came to CMMC with the last batch of photos from Shwe Lin Ban village on the East bank of the Yangon River, an hour and a half's drive from Yangon. With the donation in early July that we offered to Mahāgandhayon Monastery in Yangon, a rice and oil offering through Shwe Lin Ban Mahāgandhayon Monastery was organised to over a hundred households. The dāna included an offering of rice to the monastery and to a nunnery right across the



Two of the nuns at Sasana Sukhacari Laputta Nunnery



At Shwe Lin Ban Monastery

road. There are fifty nuns there, five adults and forty-five kids - forty of whom are orphans of the cyclone! They have to go by bus into Yangon twice a week for alms, it takes two hours in either direction. So the dāna was very appreciated!

She also had an update about a August in the Dedaye district offered to Mahāgandhayon. The dāna ended up going to

Daw Nilar said that an earlier gandhayon Monastery was not offered to the villagers but also rice. Each farmer got one bag of that there will be food for next us to know that all the Sayadaws are sending us metta.



*Dāna at Shwe Lin Ban Monastery,
the lush green paddy fields*

medicine-dāna from with money that we had Monastery in Yangon. thirty-six villages!

dāna through Mahā-only fertilizer that was seventy bags of seed seed rice. This means year! Daw Nilar wants Mahāgandhayon

With the funds all gone, we thought that this would be the end of our involvement of doing relief work! As it turns out, this was just the beginning! In September, we got another generous dāna from an Australian friend for the victims of the cyclone Nargis.

And more donations are pouring in from my friends and meditators in Switzerland/Europe where I am currently teaching a number of meditation retreats. As Daw Virañani has gone into silent retreat for a couple of months, we will suspend any relief work until I return to Burma at the end of December. By then, I suspect, we will have another big chunk of dāna to be distributed!

After returning to Burma before vassa (the time of the three-month 'rains-retreat'), Chanmyay Myaing Sayadaw had gone to the delta a couple of times to offer relief in remote villages with dāna from Malaysia. Inspired by that Daw Virañani spoke to Sayadaw about offering much needed support to remote villages in the delta. Sayadaw immediately started to make telephone calls and in a short time he had 'found' a couple of villages that had so far not received much help. Sayadaw even offered Daw Virañani to come along for this dāna. This was a somewhat delicate issue (foreigners are officially not allowed to go to the delta), but there were no hick-ups on that trip.

With the donation received from Australia, rice, oil, beans, onions, medicines, and candles were bought and loaded on a truck. Daw Virañani wrote a beautiful and long email about the offering, which was done on September 16. I will let her tell you all about:

"We left [CMMC] at 04.15 or so. It had been raining all night but it had stopped, and as we drove we could see a setting full moon through light hazy clouds. After an hour or so on a very bumpy dirt road, the sky began to pale a little, and the green of the fresh paddy began to show. There had been no check-points and no traffic - it was very early! Sayadaw pointed towards the horizon on his side of the car - and there was the Shwedagon [pagoda], glowing in the far distance! That was the first of many "Wow!"s.

Soon after that, we crossed the Twante bridge and then arrived at the town of Twante itself. There we had breakfast at the monastery where U Suvira [one of the monks at CMMC] had lived for seven years. The monastery is on a small hill above town, quite near the Shwesandaw pagoda. Before Nargis, the monastery was deeply shaded by huge old trees, but now there is a lot of sky - and fallen trees and branches: kitchen firewood for a long time!



Shwedagon Pagoda

We stayed after breakfast for a while, as they loaded the last of the rice into the truck (U Suvira had sent most of it ahead the day before). It was long enough that we got to see all the monks and novices head off on alms round. They went off in two directions, and so before-hand had formed parallel lines facing opposite ways. First, they chanted a metta chant, then quietly filed out - and a great choreographer could not come close to the effect. Oh! I got goose-bumps!

Then it was off to the jetty! So 'our' dāna expedition had by then grown to about twenty-five people, filling a biggish boat! The group included: Chanmyay Myaing Sayadaw, U Suvira, the Sayadaw and two nuns from the monastery in Twante, two other foreign yogis from CMMC, Mimmi, Ma Thwet, the camera man, and about ten devotees of Chanmyay Myaing Sayadaw from Twante.

We were going to two places, about an hour and forty-five minute boat ride up the Twante Canal from the town. As we began to leave it behind, the effect of the cyclone first showed by the many yellow plastic roofs! But the pottery sheds and boat builders were obviously doing well - perhaps an indirect effect of the storm!



People waiting at Tauku Monastery

As we chugged along we could see on both sides of the canal many large downed trees overgrown with vines and battered coconut palms. Everything was very green and overgrown. Here and there were little bamboo houses (or clusters of houses) built on stilts, near or even over the water - with the only access being by boat. Many were badly damaged or clearly repaired. There was a wide range: mostly the houses were very humble, but there was the occasional 'rich village' with modern houses and concrete bridges over the side-streams.

People were fishing, and there were some planted areas visible behind some of the houses: bananas or vegetables growing on mounds above the high water table. Every so often we'd see someone rowing a little boat with produce or fish. I guessed going to either the market or to a middleman with a motorboat!

After about five miles (there are mile markers) we came to a fork where the canal meets a bigger river and then turned left into the quieter of the two forks. Then a while later we arrived at our destination, Tauku village and monastery. We could see the monastery from the canal, set back from the river. To get in, we passed it and then back-tracked a little way down an aquatic driveway, which on the canal side had a pasture with water buffalo grazing quietly. On the inland side, there were lots of little bamboo houses with children peeking out the windows at us, and waving!

The monastery had a reasonable jetty, actually another boat of intermediate height between ours and the walk - so it was only a little scramble to get off the boat. I was immediately given into the care of two village ladies who took me very firmly by the elbow and escorted me through the throng of people under a covered walk to the main building. Later, once it started raining, I discovered why they were treating me like a fragile little old lady - the concrete was very slippery!

Here the impressions began to come very fast and my memory is crowded with quick images! The most immediate impression were the faces of the



Young lady

villagers, many thickly painted with thanaka [a natural ‘cream’ made from the bark of a tree]. There was both shyness and great curiosity, and murmured comment that I was glad not to understand (words get in the way sometimes)! The smiles needed no translation! These were simple villagers, and very faithful - without the educated sophistication of city folk. As the monks and I were escorted in, there were many people who were bowing as we went by.

The thickness of the crowd was not only on account of the dāna - it had been very windy and rainy the night before and many had come to the monastery for protection, in fear of another cyclone! To get there, everyone (except the people right next door) had to come by boat. I could really see how the water is like a road for these people - much easier to navigate through than all the tangled marshy vegetation!

I was led past a pavilion a big lotus pond. Then there leaning precariously and ahead the main unscathed. Then we were Hall (many more people!!!) had been prepared for The Sayadaw was there to immediate and very big mind (which had been incoming new impression to Ooooooooo, Dhamma! I felt at his feet and just being Mimmi only after we’d left that this Sayadaw is reputed to have great psychic powers.)



*Ma Thwet offering medicine to
Tauku Sayadaw*

with a pagoda behind it, and was an older teak hall, missing much of its roof building, concrete and led through the Dhamma and upstairs, where tables lunch.

greet us, he made an impression on me. The going quickly from one another) just stopped. like dropping reverentially quiet. (I learned from

We offered lunch, then ate ourselves. It was the second meal since leaving CMMC, and we hadn’t even offered anything yet! It was a feast, thanks in large part to Mimmi and U Suvira making all the necessary arrangements to be sure these three foreign vegetarian lambs didn’t starve!

Then the main point of all this began. Downstairs, with the villagers sitting amidst the dāna - a big pile of rice, and tables of medicines, candles, beans, oil and onions - we began the sharing of merit. First the old Sayadaw and then Chanmyay Myaing Sayadaw leading the chanting.



The sharing of merit at Tauku Monastery

By now (in Switzerland) it was about when you’d have been doing your morning sit before breakfast. So I shared the merit and sent lots of metta: first to you, as our names were read and then to all the donors, wanting to bring everybody into the room. The people’s chanting was loud and hugely heartfelt - wow - the hair on the back of my neck stood up! I thought, well, no need to bring Ariya here, she can probably hear this in Europe!!!

After that, the happy work began - and the next few hours are a blur - a rush of scooping rice, dipping oil, handing out medicines, beans, onions, or candles. There was a man at the door calling each person/household in by name, and they went from station to station: rice, medicines, candles, beans, onions, oil, then back out the door. All very orderly. I noticed that many people came with new pots, and later we found out these pots had been offered



Pumping and pouring oil

earlier by other donors...but that there's not much food to go in them! So now, at least for a little while, the pots can be put to good use!



Scooping rice

The offering itself (like at CMMC) was done as fast as possible, because there were a lot of people to distribute to! So there wasn't much chance for anyone to do much more than move quickly from one place to another. But after offering for some time, I took a break and went outside to meet people, camera in hand. That's when I could really connect and see the happiness and gratitude that everyone was feeling. By then it was raining hard (the blessing had started once we began to offer food!), but no-one seemed to care. The atmosphere wasn't jubilant, of course, but quietly happy.

Oh, Ariya, I think you would have loved seeing some of the little girls - real bright sparks! But I couldn't help wondering about them in particular. Their lives seem unimaginable to me in so many ways, and so very different from my situation at that age. Will life always be a struggle, as it clearly is for their parents? Would they get married as teenagers and live here in poverty their entire lives, struggling to raise a family until they died at the ripe old age of sixty or so? Sombre thoughts amidst a happy day!

It was such a treat to take pictures of people, then to show them the results immediately. It's the sort of thing that needs no language! Of course the kids were the least shy, but even the grannies got over their reserve when they saw the pictures! One delightful older lady did a little princess parody, teasing herself by patting her hair and saying coyly "Hla deeee..." [beautiful]. We all laughed with her in delight. I was amazed at the agility and strength of these people. They were managing to navigate the slick concrete with bags on their heads containing the four viss of rice, two viss of beans and a viss of onions!

All too soon it was time to leave. So then we all skied down the wet concrete to the boat, and went to the second monastery in Ngaw Pyaw Zu village. This was the only sad part of the day for me. The rain kept us all in the boat as the rice and oil were taken in, and then we chugged off as the Sayadaw at that place waved from the shore from under his umbrella. We left and off we went down the river in a light rain, which had pretty much stopped by the time we got back to Twante.



*Mimmi with two kids,
people waiting for their turn*

By then it was about 4 pm, and as we drove towards Yangon, the fields were the most amazing emerald green! Soon after leaving Twante, there's a cluster of pagodas you can see from the road, and I asked about these. "Very old," I was told. I said that I'd be lovely to see them someday - and no sooner said than done: so we went! It was a bit of an adventure, through a little village with a corpse on display - a standard village funeral. The pagodas were beautiful but decaying. It was touching: a vivid reminder of change, and how even big impressive things have their own life-spans. There wasn't so much to see as to imagine: the hey-day of these places when there were palaces, towns, and many devotees. Anicca [impermanence]. Someday the Shwedagon pagoda will be like this."

For me, Daw Virañani has done a beautiful 'word-painting' with everything and everybody becoming very lively and lucid. I hope it is as clear and vivacious to all of you who have never been to Burma!

The offerings in Tauku village went to 101 households with a population of 495 people, and to 193 households in Ngaw Pyaw Zu village with a population of 965 people.



A happy recipient at Tauku Monastery

Dāna is a beautiful practice: it not only brings immeasurable benefits by beautifying our heart and lifting our spirits but it also brings uncountable benefits and much needed support to other living beings.

May all the merit that has been accumulated through our combined efforts contribute to the happiness and welfare of all sentient beings!

With metta
Ariya Ñani

1 viss = 1.6 kg
1180 kyats = 1 US\$ (subject to frequent change!)