

WORKS OF GREAT BEAUTY

(Dana to Nunneries)



Do you want to join us? Nuns from the Sasanasukhacari Laputta Nunnery

Between January and March, we were blessed by the happy task of distributing more of your dana for nuns! Your most recent offerings have gone out to 24 nunneries and a total of 254 nuns, as well as one monastic school; these have ranged from big well-established nunneries to brand new places with little more than land, a name, and a dream. Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu!

Here are the bare figures:

21'911'800 Kyats (about 20'000 USD!) went to:

- 20 nunneries in Mingaladon, Yangon
- 1 nunnery in Sittwe
- 3 nunneries in Mrauk Oo

This is a total of about 150 nuns in Mingaladon, 104 nuns in Sittwe/Mrauk Oo, plus 1 monastic school with more than one hundred students.

Nuns in Burma receive none of the prestige of their male counterparts, and many have hard lives indeed. The average nun in Mingaladon (north of Yangon) goes on alms round twice a week, sometimes more depending on need. 'Alms round' means something fundamentally different for nuns than it does for monks. Monks go out for food in the immediate vicinity of their monastery for an hour or so each morning; other needs are taken care of through donations made to the monastery - as either cash or the requisites themselves (food, clothing, shelter, or medicine). An established monastery may receive lavish donations for meals, robe offerings, and buildings. In contrast, nuns living independently of established monasteries or meditation centres get the barest of support - they are only offered raw rice or cash, and they must usually make do with what they get on alms round alone.

In spite of this, many of these nuns have acquired advanced degrees and work tirelessly to raise and educate the next generation of young nuns, while somehow finding the time to keep up with their own studies. Much as they would like to practice, periods of meditation retreat are impossible for many of these nuns, given their responsibilities to the younger nuns. Most nunneries have at least a few (and sometimes many) girls living as nuns, and they are given an education in both Dhamma and worldly subjects. Many of these kids have lost at least one parent, and since Nargis, many girls who lost families in the storm have received refuge and care in nunneries.



Nuns care and are cared for

For some the nuns near CMMC, an alms round day starts very early. They pack tiffin tins for their noon meal, and head out between 4:30 and 6:30 in the morning. After more than an hour in an overloaded public bus to Yangon, they spend the entire day walking from door to door, or in market places, quietly accepting whatever small notes are placed in their little aluminium alms bowls. It is exhausting and humbling work, in the heat and traffic of the city - or in the rain during the monsoon. And after all that, a group of 10 nuns may receive only 5'000 - 10'000 Kyats per week. With this they must build (or repair) their buildings, buy food, robes, and medicines. A month's-worth of rice for 4 people costs about 12'000 Kyats; cloth for a set of robes can easily cost 10'000 Kyats. And since Nargis, all costs have escalated and show little sign of coming down.

A large and hidden burden that many nuns carry is debt. In order to buy land or build the sometimes flimsy bamboo structures they call home, many of these nuns have had to go into significant debt. And because

of unscrupulous and unregulated village money lenders, that debt can climb into the 'unpayable' category very very quickly, if the nuns are (for any reason - such as Nargis or ill health) unable to make payments.

We immediately set out to re-connect with the nuns we had already met, both to see how they were and to assess their current needs. Our last contact with many of these nuns had been during vassa (the rains retreat, when nuns generally do not travel). Once vassa is over, nuns and monks often travel, visit their natal villages, or begin new projects - and populations of both monasteries and nunneries can be in flux at this time.

First we spent some weeks in the neighbourhood around CMMC, visiting the nuns we already knew. Our friend Carol Wilson was here at CMMC in January to interview Burmese nuns, with the view to share their stories the wider world - a fortunate circumstance that allowed us to learn much more about these nuns, and to easily assess their current needs. The interviews that Carol did brought to light the intimate texture of their lives, both now



*Daw Rupasanda,
Sittwe*

and before they had been nuns. Hearing the details of these stories was moving and inspiring; in spite of their humble appearance, many of these nuns live heroic lives!

We also went farther afield, wanting to spread the dana net to places that had received little or no dana yet. We knew it would be easy to find deserving nuns with needs, because the need is endless here. We limited our efforts (in Mingaladon) to areas that were close to where we had already offered, and where we could easily inquire about other nearby nuns and nunneries. Because we planned a journey to the Rakkhine State on the west coast, we also took some dana there, knowing through reliable sources of nuns who needed support.

In this round of dana to the nuns, we quickly realized that food is now less of a need than things that only hard cash can buy - like electricity, toilets, a good roof, debt relief...etc. So we decided to make offerings of cash, to be used either as the nuns most saw fit, or for specific projects.

We decided to offer to each nunnery a lump sum - here in Mingaladon, generally 10 or 20 lakhs of Kyats (about 1000 - 2000 USD), depending on need and number of nuns. To the very small nunneries we offered 2 - 5 lakhs of Kyats (about 200 - 500 USD).

Then we had the happy task of making the offerings! Because of the size of the dana, we would be walking out of CMMC carrying huge amounts of cash - even by our standards, let alone Burmese ones! It is a testament to the power of the Dhamma in this country that we never worried about this; mostly it just seemed funny - 2 nuns and 3 or 4 lay people carrying a small fortune in cash out the side gate of the monastery, and down the dusty road into the countryside!



The little nuns from Zaloon Parahita Nunnery, Mingaladon

Your dana has made a huge difference to these nuns, allowing them to have enough food, healthy living situations, and providing small conveniences - many of which we as Westerners take completely for granted. We were particularly delighted to be able to offer more dana to more nunneries than we were able to right after Nargis - and to offer more to some of the places that had received relatively little in the last round of offerings. Last July, right after Nargis, we offered to only three nunneries - and then to an additional eight in August and September, for a total of eleven. Now, thanks to your abundant generosity, we were delighted to be able to give dana to over 250 nuns in 24 nunneries!

It has been beautiful to bring dana to nunnery after nunnery, unexpected and unannounced - it is the Burmese way not to plan ahead too much! How we wish you could have seen the quiet gratitude of these nuns, and their understated delight in unexpected good fortune. These nuns have graciousness and assurance, and even those who are very poor have a bearing of dignity and great beauty. So,

even though in many cases your dana was a substantial sum (more than a year's worth of alms round offerings - enough to make a significant difference to their lives), no-one was too effusive in their thanks! But the great happiness and gratitude were palpable everywhere we went.

Each nunnery we visited and offered to had its own story, and its own wonderful 'flavour.' So here are a few vignettes, to 'bring' you along with us to the offerings, and to give you a picture of just how far your dana has gone.

Sasana Sukha Cari Laputta Nunnery



The new enlarged building

One of the first nunneries we visited with dana was Sasanasukhacari Laputta, where 11 young nuns and 3 adult nuns live in a bamboo hut that was badly damaged by Nargis (and which was still leaning and propped up by whatever they were able to scrounge at the time). Last summer and autumn we had been able to offer food, and now we could offer more substantial support. We had asked what they needed most, and found that it was a proper toilet - and it was obvious without our having to ask that their living situation was flimsy and overcrowded.

So there was delight on both sides when we could give them enough (about 2000 USD) for repairs and construction! And they lost no time in getting things started! In less than 2 weeks they had remodeled and reinforced their original building, and were finishing off the brickwork for the new toilets.

In January, we had taken some visiting Westerners there, and they saw the most basic of structures (one of them put his foot through the fragile bamboo floor!). Now in March, there is an all new expanded building with a wooden floor, separate sleeping spaces for the senior nuns (Daw Uttamasingi and Daw Uttarasingi) and the young nuns, and a concrete toilet & washing area - as well as electric light and a pump for their well! They have also built an outlying kitchen hut and an

alcove on the main house so that they can eat and sleep in separate places (an important thing in the permeable spaces of Burmese buildings where ants and other insects move in and out at will!). Much of the construction work they did themselves or with the help of family, so minimizing construction costs - allowing your dana to go a long way!



left side: shrine, right side: Daw Uttamasingi's room



The new toilets and the shower area under construction



Daw Uttamasingi and Daw Uttarasingi

Chanmyavati Nunnery



Left: Daw Paññasiri, abbess of Chanmyavati Nunnery

Chanmyavati Nunnery has 14 young nuns who study Pali and Abhidhamma, and has a high standard of Dhamma education. When we visited there in February, they were in the midst of a three-day chanting of the Patthana (24 hours per day!), one of the books of the Abhidhamma. Large old-fashioned loudspeakers were fixed to the roof of the nunnery, blasting out the chanting far and wide across the countryside. On our way there that day, we had been able to hear it almost a quarter of a mile away! Down below, one by one, each nun took her half-hour turn at the microphone which was set up in front

of the shrine. In spite of the volume, there was a feeling of both stillness and peace. (It is said in Burma that when knowledge of the Abhidhamma disappears, then the Buddha's dispensation will also disappear. So chanting and disseminating the Patthana is said to keep the Buddha Sasana alive.) It is rare for nuns to chant the Patthana, and the teacher there, Daw Paññasiri, was very pleased that they were able to do this!

In showing us around the place earlier, Daw Paññasiri had told us that because she has no main sponsor, any necessary repairs and building work must wait until money becomes available. An unfinished project behind the main house was sitting there as a 'signature' of Nargis - they had been unable to finish a hostel for the young nuns that is a replacement for one lost in the cyclone. This is the usual situation here in Myanmar where construction of a building may come to a complete halt (sometimes for years!) when the money runs out. But now at Chanmyavati, because of your dana, they will soon have the badly needed space. Their main building is solid enough, but for almost a year now, all the young nuns have had to sleep crowded together in the main shrine room like sardines in a tin!



The happy task of offering

Dhammanimmitarama Nunnery



A new nunnery is coming to life...

While visiting the Pyapon Nunnery in January, we met a nun we had not seen there before. Ma Malasingi was staying there only temporarily, and it turned out she had bought land next to CMMC and was planning to establish her own nunnery as soon as she could raise the funds. Like many nuns here in Mingaladon, she has roots in the Irrawaddy Delta, and plans bring 20 young nuns here. She was especially happy to be able to live right next to a meditation centre! And we were happy to be able to offer her a little support (10 lakhs, or about 1000 USD) for this, knowing we'd have nuns as neighbours.

Less than a month later, we watched with delight from the top floor of the CMMC foreigner's building as 7 nuns began the hard work of hand-clearing the land next door. A few days later, men came carrying in timbers and roofing, and now they are well on their way to completing the main building of the new monastery. Its name is to be "Dhammanimmitarama," meaning "delighting in the sign of the Dhamma."



Their temporary bath room

For the time being, the nuns are all camping under tarps, happy to have their own place, even though it is incredibly rustic. And the new building is going up amazingly quickly - and when we went over for a visit at the end of March, we learned that it is a house from Pyapon that was dismantled board by board and then brought up here in two trucks!



Clearing the land

Mangalagonwei Nunnery



Daw Obhasi (right) and two nuns from Mangalagonwei Nunnery

At Mangalagonwei Nunnery, the head nun had borrowed 1,700,000 Kyats to buy land and build a bamboo hut, right before Nargis hit - it was spectacularly bad timing, but nothing she could have ever foreseen. Now, because of the hard times since then, she has been unable to repay the principal debt or even the rapidly accumulating burden of interest - and the debt has skyrocketed! In the last year, it has grown from 1,700,000 Kyats to almost 3,000,000 Kyats. In March, we had noticed Daw Obhasi had begun to live behind closed doors and she had mentioned being afraid - but not because the neighbourhood was dangerous. Slowly (and with great shame on her part) the story came out, as she got to know us more and could relax. We had already

offered her some dana, but this had gone to provide the most basic of necessities - shelter and electricity. So were very happy to be able to offer some more so that she could be free from the fear and oppression that debt brings.

Nwe Kwe Nunneries

In the middle of January, we went to a village named Nwe Kwe, about a five-minute drive north of CMMC, to visit some of the nuns we know there, and to meet other nuns in the area who we knew about, but hadn't yet met. It is a lovely area, next to a lotus pond and a small pagoda - and very tranquil, in spite of being only a little way off the main road.

When we showed up at the first nunnery, Kyesin Aye, we discovered that all the adult nuns were gone - but even in their absence, the 3 little nuns there were diligently and very loudly doing the evening puja. Then, after stopping at nearby Paññayaungkyi Nunnery to offer dana, we got a brief tour of



Kyesin Aye Nunnery

the small neighbourhood; it was evening, and in the fading light we went from one little nunnery to the next, meeting the one or two nuns living in each little house.



Daw Dhammananda



Daw Nanasi

As the nuns came out to meet us there was delight and curiosity on both sides. We were happy to be able to offer each of them a little dana, and there was a palpable mixture of delighted surprise and shyness as we gathered under the trees by one of the front gates to take photographs. These nuns quietly and humbly do the work of the Dhamma, each in their own unique way, sometimes under the guidance of a teacher, sometimes on their own. It is a beautiful but rigorous life they lead.

One place put the day by day struggle these nuns face into stark relief. Two nuns, Daw Ayesuvati and Daw Javanañani, were living together in a partially completed house that had clearly seen better days. Nargis had done its damage, and although there was an upstairs, it was no longer usable. So they were jammed together in the tiny and dark downstairs area, making do as best as they could. Though relatively young, they were unable to go on alms round much because of ill health, so facing a cycle of



*Daw Ayesuvati &
Daw Javanañani*



With the nuns of Paññayaungkyi Nunnery

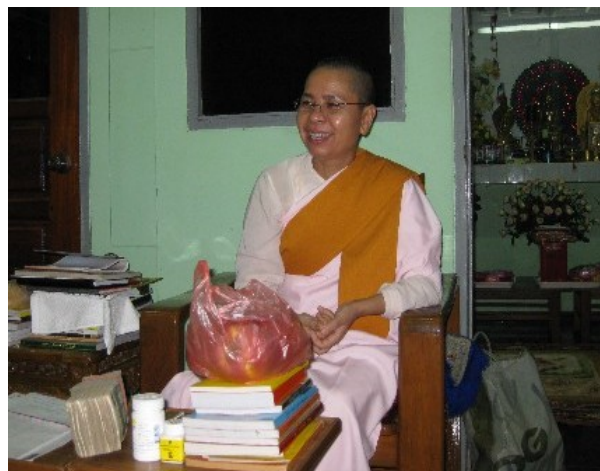
ever increasing difficulty and isolation. Nuns living outside a large establishment who are too old or ill to go on alms round can quickly become destitute; for these nuns there is no safety net!

Daw Yuzana's Monastic School

Immediately after cyclone Nargis hit, Daw Yuzana (a nun we know who lives about 15 minutes by car from CMMC) was offered land for a school - and by the beginning of the academic year (within about 3 weeks!!!) it was built and running. Now, almost a year later, (as funds permit) she is upgrading the temporary bamboo classrooms with more durable brick and concrete. She is also in the process of finishing a large building containing a hostel and shrine room for those students who are resident nuns.

Of the students here, many but not all ordain as nuns. Some of these girls are orphans or from extremely poor families; others come to ordain because of misfortune or adversity, and Daw Yuzana graciously and generously helps each one, at no cost to the student.

The story of the daughter of one of the helpers at CMMC is a stark example of the kind of things that can bring young women to Daw Yuzana's monastery. She had been a bright student, about to start her last year of high school, when calamity struck. During her summer job at a plastic tarp factory, she lost the 3 middle fingers on her right hand in an accident with the cutting equipment. She was underage, and so given neither care nor compensation from the company - and even when the hand had finally healed, she was unable to enroll for her final year of school. Now, because of Daw Yuzana's skill and kindness, she has finished school, and in March took the vital 10th standard university entrance exams. Recently, she visited CMMC, and shyly said that she is very happy now, and wants to remain a nun for the rest of her life.

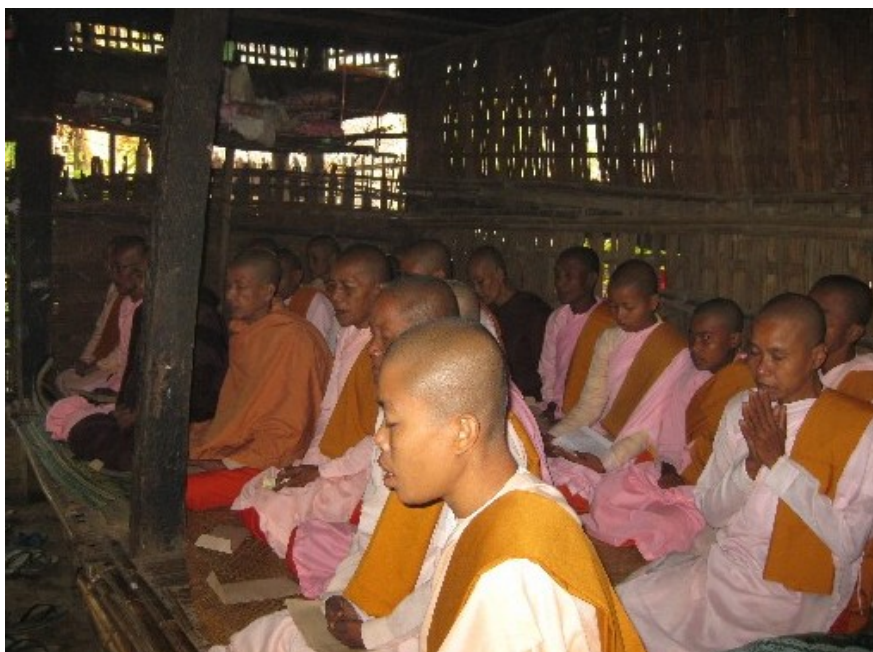


Daw Yuzana

However, Daw Yuzana's intention to provide these girls with an education comes with no expectation or requirement that they stay as nuns for life. She (and many of the other nuns who ordain and teach young girls) have told us that they simply want to give these girls a good and wholesome start in life - then whatever they do after that, they will be good people.

In receiving our dana, and hearing our praise for what she has managed to accomplish in such a short time, Daw Yuzana simply and humbly said that she just does what has to be done. Long may she continue to be able to do so!

Bandoola Nunneries, Mrauk Oo



The nuns from the Bandoola Nunneries

Towards the end of January we went on a pilgrimage to Mrauk Oo, an ancient town in the north-west of Myanmar that rivals Pagan for the richness of its Buddhist sites. With us were Daw Ariya Ñani, Mimmi, Marjo Oosterhoof, and Carol Wilson. Marjo had told us there were many nuns in Mrauk Oo, so we had earmarked some of the nuns' dana to take to them. We found a richness of nuns' communities, indeed, and so gave 3 offerings to a total of more than 100 nuns - both in Mrauk Oo proper, in the nearby village of Vesali, and in the coastal town of Sittwe.



*An elderly nun
receiving her dana*

Of the offerings we made there, one was especially touching - to a group of 22 adult nuns living amongst the shrines near the edge of Mrauk Oo (a neighbourhood called Bandoola). Instead of being in one big nunnery, the nuns there live in what is essentially a nuns-village within a village. It is a tidy group of bamboo huts set amongst bamboo and big trees, each with its own tiny garden by the door - often no more than a cluster of fragrant ginger here or a chili plant there. The feeling being amongst these nuns is one of being amongst family - while they live separately in groups of 2 or 3 or 5, everyone is clearly part of the larger community.

We first went one day to meet the nuns, then came back the next day to offer the dana. At the appointed time, we were ushered into the dim and

rustic ground floor of one of the little nunneries, a bamboo and wood house. Two of the younger nuns had organized everyone, so when we arrived they were all there, some in the traditional pink robes, some in the less common brown worn by 'forest nuns' - nuns of all ages, from young women to grannies. The excitement was muted, but this was clearly 'an event' - and a very happy one! One by one, the nuns from each nunnery were called up to receive their allotment from one of us (we had decided to offer 20'000 Kyats to each nun), and each time an envelope changed hands, there was a heartfelt "Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu!" At the end they all chanted a blessing for us and for all of you: sharing the merit and offering metta.



The Bandoola nuns seeing us off

Kyaikasan Nunnery, Sittwe



Daw Dassanasingi (far right)

We had been told that there was a large nunnery in the coastal town of Sittwe that needed support, so on our return from Mrauk Oo, we visited to offer dana. It was a magic moment when we arrived in a little open-sided jeep. The nuns noticed that there were some foreign visitors, including two nuns! There was an eruption of curiosity and happy waving from the young nuns - this was clearly cause for great excitement. We were later told that many of them had never seen a foreign nun, let alone two - which was something we had been told a number of times in Mrauk Oo, also!

We were all ushered upstairs, and the resident nuns poured in - there were 30 at this place. It is a study nunnery with nuns ranging in age from youngsters to Daw Dassanasingi who is 80 years old and has been a nun for 50 years! The teacher there is Daw Sasanasingi, vibrant and outgoing - only 25 years old, but already with 13 vassa (rains retreats) as a nun. They have a number of buildings (one main substantial two-storey building, plus several smaller bamboo and thatch ones), but only the most basic of facilities. We were told that their greatest need was a good toilet. Sure enough, on our tour around the tidy compound, we saw the aging hut that passed as the main toilet for all these nuns, clearly in great need of repair!



Our group with the nuns from Kyaikasan Nunnery, Sittwe

Although they do have some local supporters (a lady happened to be there that day helping them install electric lights, for example), it is no small task to sustain that many nuns! They need 6 viss (about 22 pounds/10 kilos) of raw rice per day - and at 520 Kyats per viss, this comes to over 3 USD, a big sum to collect on their meager alms rounds. The 10 lakhs we offered was a great gift - of health and ease for these lovely and very dedicated nuns.

When we offered the dana, there was more than the usual understated reception. Here, the

quality of the gathering was especially joyful, curious, and animated - like a coming together of strangers at a family reunion. We asked (and were asked) many questions, and they were (predictably) astonished at Daw Ariya's fluency in Burmese! There was a great deal of laughter and banter, and more than once we were invited to stay!

As we left, some of the nuns insisted on accompanying us to some pagodas nearby, showing us around their neighbourhood - and urging us to return, whether we had dana or not!

We Are Family



May YOU be well, ...

Not only at these few places, but at each offering, there was a palpable connection, a feeling of Dhamma family. It was very moving to be in the flow of metta - from you, through us, to all of them, feeling the bonds between us all, in spite of physical separation half a world apart. The blind granny with cataracts, the genial round-faced 'aunties,' the shy teens in the back row, the tiny and very engaging little nuns...these and all the others are truly our sisters.

Our boundless gratitude and metta goes to each of YOU who have helped to make the lives of these good and beautiful beings a little easier!



... happy and peaceful!

May they all have health, safety, hardship, may they long the Buddha's teachings into the your great generosity bring you

With metta
Virañani



See you again...!

ease, and freedom from continue to bring the light of world, and may the merit of the greatest happiness!