

“Like Offering Water To a Thirsty Person”

(Support for Monastic Schools)



Ananda Metta School

Early in January we all jammed into the monastery Pajero (very generously loaned to us for the day by Sayadaw U Indaka) and took the hour-long bumpy drive to visit the monastery of another U Indaka—and Ananda Metta School, which he founded in 2010. We had heard from our friend Glen of Helping Hands how much conditions had improved here since last year, but we were totally unprepared for the impact of seeing the changes first-hand.

It began as we approached the village and one of us noticed a distant high rooftop that had not been there the previous year. “Look,” she said with some excitement, “there’s the school...it’s *huge!!*” Another of us, more cautious, said “No way—that’s got to be something else. It can’t be *that* big!” We all had a noisy but good-humored difference of opinions until finally the car turned

the last corner and we could see that the tall roof *was* Ananda Metta Monastery. There was a moment of stunned silence that was broken first by a collective “Wooaaaaaah,” and then the car filled with a babble of voices, as each of us simultaneously expressed astonished delight.

The neighborhood next to the monastery and school was no less dismal than it had been last year, but rising from the swampy land at the end of the road were shining new buildings, housing the school and living space for the novices and monks who reside here. Many of the old ramshackle structures in the compound remained, as if to assure us (in case we didn’t believe our eyes) that this was indeed the same place. The word ‘awe’ is not an overstatement of what I felt getting out of the car and slowly (it felt like in slow motion) doing a 180 to get my bearings. There was the original bamboo classroom...but dwarfed by a new one next door. And on either side of us were two even bigger buildings—later we learned they were the novices’ residence and a handsome sima (ordination) hall. And around the compound, other new buildings were in various stages of completion.



Sayadaw U Indaka pointing to the school insignia on a boy’s uniform

He also spoke of his satisfaction with the capable volunteers who have taken on managing the building projects and organizing the school and monastery finances; this has been very helpful.

The primary school now has 165 students, and at the start of the next school year (in May) secondary school classes were set to begin in the new building. An endowment fund pays the teachers’ salaries, and he told us this arrangement works very successfully—he said he is very glad to be able to give the teachers a decent salary because that ensures that the students get the best possible quality of instruction.

We saw even more vividly how much had changed when U Indaka showed us around the compound. The new classroom building is indeed a marvel—it is wonderful by any standard.



The new and the old side by side



Where the novices sleep, before and after—from mud floor to clean and comfortable. Note the lines for mosquito nets in the second photo.

And the lives of the monks and novices who live at the monastery have been completely transformed by the new dormitory. The 2-story building where they now stay is a world apart from the unsanitary dirt-floored bamboo hut that flooded in the rainy season.



Learning 'Q' and 'R'

Primary school classes were being held in the original bamboo classrooms, and we went in to find that the kids were learning the English alphabet, with the usual force and intensity of children who know education is their 'ticket out'. That U Indaka has managed to get local support for the school was obvious from the many donors' names painted on the sides of desks.

And there's much more than just a school here—Ananda Metta offers a free health clinic and clean drinking water for everyone, as well as community support that fosters an atmosphere of harmony in the neighborhood. Recently when a block of land in the surrounding village was about to be sold (which would have required many people to move), there were going to be protests and demonstrations. But U Indaka mediated, and thanks to that the government has ruled that the villagers are to be allowed to stay.



The health clinic is here, for now.
This will soon change!

The community surrounding the school remains desperately poor. U Indaka told us that often students come from abusive homes and are not taught how to behave properly; in the village, alcohol and gambling are widespread and there are few good role models for these kids. So he feels a big responsibility to teach them how to live a good life. They also learn about the basics of personal health care; things like how to use a toilet, how to bathe and how to clip their nails.



The homes next to Ananda Metta School. Education, health care and water are badly needed!

When asked about what prompted him to come to this very poor place and start the school, he said, "It's like offering water to a thirsty person; all they [the kids] want is an education. In life in samsara, we have to be together like brothers and sisters, and have warm hearts."

Our dāna alone has not done *all* this, of course, but as we reported in December (see December 2012 update "Momentum in Action") it was our initial donation last year that initiated this generosity avalanche. So we are thrilled to have

played a part, however small, in the conditions that have created this miraculous transformation. And clearly U Indaka has a plan of action for more. Posted on the wall is his vision and master plan for a 'completed' compound; this includes the school, orphanage and a health center for the village. We definitely look forward to our next visits here!



Three amazing women: Zaloon Parahita Abbess Daw Ayesingi (C) and Sub-abbess Daw Therañani (R) with Ma Kamalañani (L)

The tone at Ananda Metta School set the ‘high bar’ for our visits to the other monastic schools—how to top *that*? First on our list to see were the three ‘core’ schools that we have been supporting for the longest time—two of which had been founded with start-up funds from MIA: Zaloon Parahita, Appamada, and Kyaikalo Schools. And we were not to be disappointed—in spite of substantial challenges they are succeeding beautifully!

Zaloon Parahita School

The very next day we went to see Daw Aysingi at Zaloon Parahita School, along with our good friends Roger and Sharon Brain (of the 4 Friends Group and the Myanmar Schools Project) and Ma Kamalañani, a remarkable Burmese nun who had lived for many years at Paniditarama Centre in Yangon—and who graciously and fluidly translated the often rapid-fire conversations

I had visited many times in the past year, so the recent transformation of the school was no longer a surprise. But seeing the new 3-story building never fails to thrill. It was only a few years ago that there was only a small wooden nunnery here, and a dream (see December 2012 update “Momentum in Action”). Now 5 years later, progress at Zaloon Parahita is beginning to take less dramatic but more vital human form. Even though it’s less substantial than bricks and mortar, this kind of progress takes a huge amount of work!



This has been offered...but now there are all the other expenses!

With 610 kids (from Kindergarten through 10th Standard) and 17 teachers, Daw Ayesingi and her Sub-abbess Daw Therañani have their hands very full. One of their biggest concerns is whether the school would continue to get support from the charitable fund of a Myanmar company called Shine Hope to pay for teacher salaries—which cost the equivalent of almost 800USD each month.



Everything free of cost to the kids—the school buys books and supplies...

On top of that are all the other everyday needs and concerns of a school this size; the list seemed endless when Daw Ayesinghi cheerfully told us about all the expenses she faces every month. There is basic maintenance and many big and small needs for equipment and supplies (desks for the kids and teachers, whiteboards, and all the little ongoing necessities like pencils and notebooks); the new building still requires work; and there is the new land across the



...even trash cans!

street that they are slowly developing, and still paying off. It’s a lot to cope with, but Daw Ayesingi is very practical and level-headed, and has clear priorities so that the most important things get dealt with first. The enrollment

keeps growing and the school is bursting at the seams—so they still have to use the older buildings. She hopes eventually to upgrade them.



The joy of offering! L-R: Roger, Narayan, Virañani, Kamalañani, Daw Ayesingi

She has told us many times how grateful she is for our support—saying MIA has been her most consistent, reliable, and understanding donor. Unlike funds from rich local donors (who tend to give only for a specific and usually impressively tangible thing, like a building), our offerings to have come with no strings attached and can be used for all the essentials that allow the school to operate and grow. Wages, desks, chairs, land, books, pencils, trash cans, prizes for the kids, etc. etc. etc.! For a school this size to function well, it takes a lot of cash—and your dāna has been used for all these things, and more.

And the school is certainly proving its effectiveness! This year 23 kids were about to complete their last year of secondary education and were studying to take the tenth standard exam, a first and big milestone for the school. She hopes this number will continue to grow as the large classes of younger students mature. But she also said that it is an uphill task to keep kids in school when they reach a certain age, usually after they have finished eighth standard. At this point many youngsters are very eager to work and leave school to take jobs in the local factories. Given the level of poverty amongst the student body, it is hard to argue with the practicality of this wish. So if people's lives are to improve in the long run it will be necessary to find creative solutions that allow the kids to both stay in school *and* to work—and this is a direction that we and Daw Ayesingi are exploring together (see June 2013 update “On the Front Lines of Change”).



The neighborhood of Zaloon Parahita School (Yellow diamond) showing some of the many factories nearby. Satellite image © Google Maps

For the brightest kids who do manage to stay in school, we discussed the possibility of starting a scholarship fund in the future that would allow the top students to continue their education at the university level, and Daw Aysingi was extremely enthusiastic about this.



Nuns learning chants at a Buddhist Cultural Course

A few months later I saw Daw Ayesingi again, and even though she wasn't feeling well, she perked up as soon as she began talking about the school. By then, classes had just finished for the summer. But instead of resting, Daw Ayesingi had organized a one month Buddhist Cultural Course, followed by one month of Abhidhamma study—and on top of that, a retreat during the 10 day Burmese New Year holiday, when about 20 women from the factories

nearby would be coming to stay and ordain temporarily, for a mix of meditation and study. Of course Daw Ayesingi offers all of this on a dāna basis, as an act of generosity!

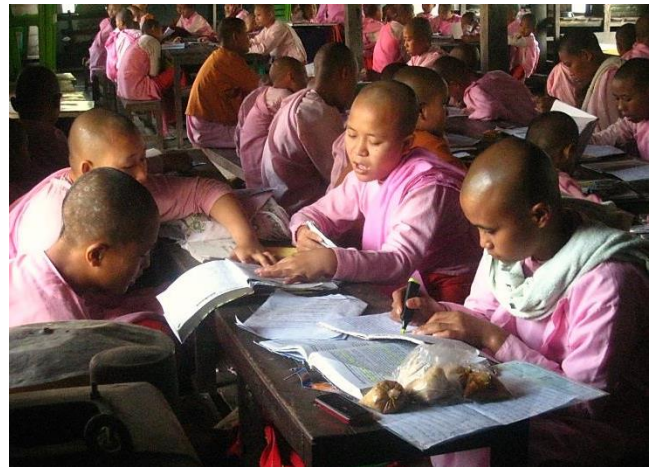


The early days before the school: Daw Therañani (L) and Daw Ayesingi (R) with some young nuns at the Zaloon Parahita Nunnery, 2009.

We have been working together with this remarkable nun for 5 years now, and as we get to know her better over the years, we are beginning to get a privileged glimpse into the deeper intentions she had for starting the school, and of what continues to motivate her when difficulties arise.

She had started out with just the 56 young women in her nunnery. She said,

“I have to teach the girls, and care for them as a mother would, showing them how to dress, how to act when they go out, how to take care of themselves.” So in addition to the school, as abbess of the Nunnery she also gives a home and love to the resident nuns. She explained that she has always had the deepest intention that none of the girls in her care would ever be harmed in any way whatsoever—and then after a long pause, she told us quietly that she decided to start the school after learning about ‘problems’ that had arisen in Yangon where girls had been ‘harmed’ at school. She was no more explicit than that, and we did not press her to elaborate any further about what she was too shy to mention directly. It was clear enough from her tone and body language what she meant. Although it was shocking to hear this, it made us all the more grateful that there are Daw Ayesingis in this world, and that we can support them!



Daw Ayesingi’s pledge to her nuns: personal safety and education

And there has been great news that has arrived as I write this update: the formal opening of the new school building has just happened and it made the TV news—so now (as our friend Mimmi says) “They have very big ceremony...Now Zaloon is famous nunnery.” So now that the School is ‘on the radar’ screen, it will undoubtedly get more public and private support, for the welfare and benefit of all!



Appamada : a ‘little sister’

Appamada School

Appamada School is Zaloon Parahita’s ‘little sister’ in several ways. Daw Sumanacari had first been inspired to start this monastic school by the success of Zalon Parahita. And she was particularly keen to help the littlest pupils—those from Kindergarten to Fourth Standard.

Open since June 2011, now over 250 students attend the school, from the Pre-kindergarten class (essentially nursery school) up to Fourth Standard. Even when the regular school term is not in session, the tiny Pre-kindergarteners still come for lessons.

Last year part of our dāna was to Appamada School was needed for a surgery for the head teacher, Daw Pun Yedi Chit, and it was a joy to see her doing so well, happily teaching free of pain and in very good health. She is instrumental for the success of the school, bringing both experience and dedication to her work.



Daw Sumanacari with teachers;
Daw Pun Yedi Chit is in the middle



How many kids can you jam into one school?

As the school grows, space is getting tight. When classes are in session, the main bamboo classroom building is packed with students, and when they hold examinations, they have to do so in two shifts because there is not enough space. Even without visiting, we had noticed the growth of the school in a delightful way: walking from CMMC to Shwe Oo Min Dhamma Centre when school is letting out is a treat: at that time there is a steady stream of happy youngsters pouring out of the little lane near Appamada School, bound for home.

Daw Sumanacari's long term vision is to build a 3-storey school building for all the classes, turning the current school building into play area for the kids. But for the time being that goal is a long way out of reach and they make the best out of what they have.



School's out!

We noticed that the Pre-kindergarten class was being held separately from the rest of the school, and under very rough conditions—in a bamboo lean-to with only one wall and a dirt floor. As basic as it was, it turned out that two teachers and a cook also lived there! Burmese people are very used to basic dwellings, and so to them this was not such a big deal. But we were deeply

touched and humbled by what everyone (from the kids up to these hard-working teachers and helpers) were able to put up with quite cheerfully.



Basic conditions for the littlest students

And of course we wanted to help. So with funds given to MIA by the Four Friends Group we offered enough for a new 55 by 30 building with tin roof, a wood floor, and proper walls. Daw Sumanacari told us she had designed it with inside partitions so that it can be used for classes and then at night up to 5 people have a place to sleep.

When we made the offering Daw Sumanacari gave us an impromptu Dhamma talk about the importance of sharing merit with all beings, both those we can see and those who are unseen or absent. As she was finishing, she told us how happy it makes her to be able to teach and support the kids, and how grateful she is to Metta In Action because it is your support that has made that possible. She is well aware that a great many people have offered the dāna to the school, and beamed when we told her that the photos that we send of the kids bring you a lot of joy.

Kyaikalo School

We have known Daw Yuzana since long before she started the school that now takes up so much of her time and energy. This year we were struck by how tired she seemed. She has not had an easy year, between health issues and the death of her mother recently. “One’s mother and the Buddha are the two main persons in one’s life”, she told us.



Daw Yuzana

But in spite of Daw Yuzana’s personal challenges, the school thrives. For several years now, the enrollment has maxed out at 425 students; 200 are nuns living at Daw Yuzana’s nunnery, and the remaining 225 are lay children. This year the number of students enrolled in university level training has again increased. Two of the nuns have received BA degrees in Myanmar. Six more are in the process of working towards degrees: Two are in 3rd year economics, three are in their second year of physics, and one is in first year mathematics. Some are also studying Buddhist subjects. All of these students are taking distance learning, since residential or day classes are not suitable for the nuns.

For students who cannot attend university in any form because they haven’t passed the 10th standard exams, Daw Yuzana hires vocational teachers who train them in various skills such as sewing and nurse’s aide training.



Each morning and evening resident nuns at Kyaikalo School do evening puja together

The day we visited happened to be the day after Daw Yuzana’s birthday, and she reflected that now it is the time in her life to practice meditation, rather than teaching so many others. She says she hopes to do 1-2 month retreat at some point, but still feels too much

responsibility for the school to be able to do that right now. Not only is she the main person responsible for fundraising, but she also feels a personal connection with the students and wants to support them when they are going through their exams. She hopes to be able to get away for a time in 2014.

The biggest challenge she faces is that donations for the school have decreased over the last few years because the economic downturn; she said that nowadays people tend to put their money into the bank rather than offering *dāna*. She wished there was an endowment fund for the school, but there have never been enough donations to put aside. Again this year, as in most previous years, she has had to contribute quite a lot from what she receives for her personal requisites to keep the school from going into arrears.

Like at Zaloon Parahita, the expenses of a school like this are staggering—and local donors are more likely to fund buildings or fancy gates than operating costs. Daw Yuzana also has to support the 200 resident nuns. That's a heavy burden resting on her slight shoulders! Hearing her speak so openly of the challenges she faces every day, I wished there were a way to totally remove her burden. We could not do that, but we did the next best thing which was to offer substantially more than in previous years.



Other Mingaladon Schools

Between CMMC and Yangon proper there is a long string of rapidly coalescing villages, connected by a very busy 2-lane highway. In this area, there are four nunnery schools we support less intensively than the ones described above. Each is large and well established, and each also has an associated nunnery. It is exactly places such as these that provide the backbone for community support in poor areas—they provide education and are places for poor girls to take refuge if they are orphaned; some also provide community medical care as well.

So here, briefly, are some vignettes of our visits to these schools~



Resident nuns study before classes begin

When we visited school was not yet in session, but it was hardly quiet as there was loud construction going on in the compound—a new classroom building was going up. Daw Silavati described how she started here in 1998, with just a simple building, and slowly more kids came and now there are almost 850 students. But because they do not have enough nutrition, many of the kids that come here cannot thrive—unfortunately, many struggle at school.

Myasingi School

Founded in 1999, this is the largest and oldest of the 8 schools we support. Over 150 nuns live here, and many local lay kids attend the school as well. The abbess, Daw Silavati, is deeply respected and has been given awards from the government in recognition of her service to the *sāsana* and the community.



Ma Myo Thet and her thanika

Daw Silavati encourages the children to help each other, so during study time lower and higher standards sit together in the same classroom and the older kids can help the younger ones. As we talked, we could not avoid noticing the very youngest resident of the monastery, Mya Moe Thet, a 3-year old foundling who had come here as a tiny infant. She herself had applied the thanika (a native sunscreen made of powdered bark mixed with water) on her face, and seemed very proud of the fact! She is deeply loved and cared for here, after a very hard start in life.

Sanmya Thitar School

Last year we had been sorry not to be able to meet Daw Khemayee, the head nun at Sanmya Thitar Nunnery and School because she was away on a meditation retreat. However, this time we visited she was at home, and graciously took us around the compound, to show the many improvements that have been made. At 47 years of age and 26 of them in robes, Daw Khemayee has ‘gravitas’ and a quiet and steady manner—after meeting her, it was very clear why the school has become as successful as it is.



Daw Khemayee, a powerful presence.

There are 461 kids in the school, from Kindergarten up to 10th Standard, including the 110 nuns who live at the monastery. The school had just closed for the summer holidays, and the nuns were busy amongst piles of pink cloth, cutting fabric for the robes for five girls who would soon be taking ordination. Once of the five was 10 year-old Ma Chit Waite, who has just arrived that very morning from Htaukyant, a town about 10 kilometers to the north. An older nun living there had noticed Ma Chit Waite living on the streets, and found out that both of the girl’s parents had died and she had no close relatives



A smile of relief: Ma Chit Waite

and nowhere to go; she has a 3 year-old brother who will also come here to live. This is a first for Sanmya Thitar, but Daw Khemayee feels a lot of compassion for these kids and very much wants to help them. Ma Chit Waite observed our conversation quietly and intently, clearly very happy to have found refuge and protection at last!

Outside, we could see that a lot of construction was going on. There is a big new 2-story building that was almost finished, and the bamboo school building we had seen last year had been demolished just the week before to make space for a new 3-story classroom and dormitory building. The workers were ‘racing the clock’, because Daw Khemayee would be teaching a 10-day meditation retreat for 100 yogis during the Water Festival a month hence, and they wanted to have at least a shell ready to use for sleeping space!

Sukagami School

We visited Sukhagami School uposatha day, when the school was not in session, so there was a peaceful feeling about the place—but even so, with 165 young nuns living here, it was far from empty. In the spacious nun’s compound, the afternoon sweeping had been done and lots of pink laundry hung drying in the sun. We were surprised to see that in the middle of the compound, a large new *sala* (assembly hall) had been built since we were last here. And though it wasn’t yet

completely finished it was obviously being used. We learned that it would be full during the New Year Festival, when both office workers and students come here to attend two 5-day meditation retreats.

Sukhagami is another big nunnery school, with 30 teachers and 572 students. The abbess (whose name is Daw Aggañani) is obviously another staggeringly capable nun! She has managed to get both local and foreign support from here and there for both the nunnery and the school, and so naturally some of that support has been made specifically for construction!



A blessing chant for the donors in the new sala

As with the other monastic schools, teacher salaries are the biggest ongoing headache for Daw Aggañani and she told us that there are times when money is tight and the teachers “have to wait a bit” to get their pay. Shine Hope Company has been helping with this to some extent, as have other donors, but now her priority is to set up an endowment fund so that she no longer needs to depend on unpredictable donations to cover this vital expense. She had already begun to save for this fund and we were delighted to add to its amount with our MIA donation.



Returning home from almsround

home from their almsround in the local village, the elder ones helping the littlest ones at the end of the queue in a way that made it clear that the nun’s community here is ‘family’!

Santisukha School

We were warmly greeted by Daw Tirisandha, the Abbess of Santisukha Nunnery and School, and Daw Paññavati, who is her cousin and Sub-abbess; the two of them together have had 60 years in robes (and they are not old)! The atmosphere here is special—a combination of homey and extremely ‘together’.

131 nuns live here, of all ages; many are from different ethnic groups in the Shan state. We were touched by the sight of some of the nuns arriving

The school has 474 students, which surprised us because last year they had ‘only’ 250. Daw Tirisandha told us that, indeed, every year the enrolment has been increasing. Fortunately last year a new classroom building was offered by the owners of a famous mohinga shop in Yangon. [Mohinga is the Burmese ‘national food’—a soup made with fish, rice noodles, and condiments.] Eventually, the hope is to build one or 2 more floors on top of this, so that all the classes can happen here rather than overflowing into the nuns’ living space. This arrangement is incredibly inconvenient, but it is also the norm in nunnery schools given the limitations of both space and

finances. Most of the nunnery schools we support are obliged to do this to some extent, often with the long-term wish to have separate space for the resident nuns.



Daw Paññavati in the tidy Santisukha grounds

Santisukha School goes up to 10th Standard and some of the students who have passed the exam are studying at the University level by correspondence. Daw Tirisandha told us that they have 3 computers, and this year she intends to start a computer training class. She was not at all daunted by the fact that no-one there knows how to use the computers! She cheerfully said that first one of the teachers will learn, and then she will teach everyone else. In Burma this kind of ‘can-do’ attitude is essential for success!

We had come when classes were not in session, but it was a day when a weekly free medical clinic is held at the school for local villagers. It was staffed by doctors from a local voluntary medical organization called ‘Hearty Farm’, and held in a large hall adjacent to the school building. Many people were there, signing in or being attended on by the doctors and their team of helpers.

This nunnery and school is a thriving nucleus of support for the whole village. When they first came in 2004, Daw Tirisandha told us, there was nothing here at all. And although she *did* have a vision of doing all this, at first they were just 4 nuns, and one of her uncles helped acquire the land. Other than that it has been an act of trust—people have just arrived with support. So we were happy to add to this flow of good wishes, with some MIA dāna for an education fund and food fund!



Part of the crowd at the medical clinic

You Give Power to Intention

The success of these nunnery schools is no less remarkable than that of Ananda Metta School, given that nuns get substantially less support than monks in Burma. In this regard, Daw Silavati of Myasingi School inspired us deeply when she told us “Nothing is impossible!” Having been through many ups and downs over the years, she knows that in her bones. When intention is powerful enough, the most wonderful and amazing things can happen—and the force of goodness that’s big enough to grow one of these schools is virtually unstoppable!

But it doesn’t come easily: accomplishing one of these miraculous transformations requires a prodigious amount of energy—and it’s an energy level that’s impossible for one person to maintain unaided. Daw Ayesingi and Daw Yuzana both told us that they are sometimes exhausted, weighed down by the responsibility of keeping their schools afloat. While their wish to help the kids is a huge incentive, when times are tough, it’s just not enough. Ultimately it is the support of donors that gives them the encouragement to keep going through thick and thin.

So with this update, we hope that you feel their deep gratitude, and the mettā that they send every day to their benefactors—*you*—who make everything possible.



For *all*: boys and girls, novices and nuns...the doorway to an education is open!

With mettā and gratitude
Virañani