

On the Front Lines of Change

(Community Support I: Support for Education and New Initiatives)



This year our MIA work was anything but ‘the usual,’ as we faced changes and new challenges on many levels. For the first time we were without the good company and core support of Venerable Ariya Ñani, who needed to be in Switzerland for medical treatment. In addition to missing her many other gifts, her absence created a ‘language void,’ as we had always heavily relied on her superb translation skills. But somehow with hard work and good friends, we were able to do everything that needed to be done, and more. MIA has always been a collaboration—and this year we could really see the power of a true group effort!

And of course change has come to Burma...but that change is anything but entirely beneficial; the situation is an incredibly complicated mix of both good news and bad news. With increased freedom of speech there is also widespread anti-Muslim rumors and rhetoric; greater cash-flow has resulted in real estate feeding frenzies and monumental traffic jams in downtown Yangon; access to more material goods brings cultural erosion and the loss of traditional values, clothing, and family structures. There is a clash of cultures as the old and the new begin to more widely meet and mingle. Sometimes it seems that the traditional ‘old’ Burma we have known for

decades is being bulldozed into the oblivion (literally and figuratively) and what is emerging is a work in process, with no clear endpoint in sight.



One of the many new car showrooms that are sprouting up like mushrooms all over Yangon. Who 'wins'?

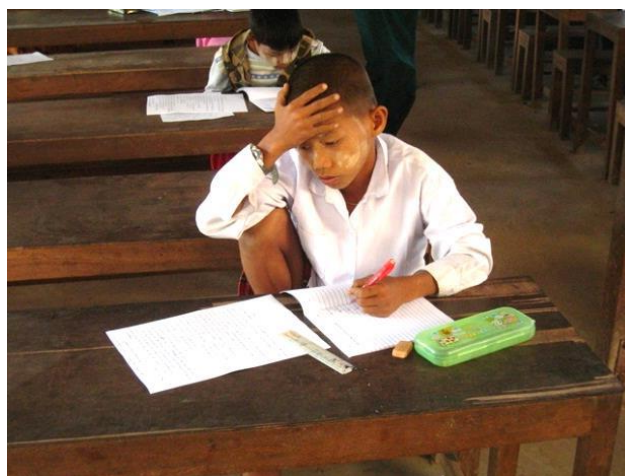
And what we have witnessed 'on the ground' while doing our MIA work (far away from the rather superficial view of international press), is that the majority of ordinary Burmese citizens still face the same sorry conditions of poverty, poor conditions, and need.

In making our offerings this year, we have clearly seen the many heartbreaking complications that face ordinary Burmese people every day. So this time around, our work has not always been an uplifting experience, as we have occasionally encountered the 'underbelly' of life in Burma—witnessing how difficult a transition this is for everyone, and how economic, bureaucratic, and social limitations stifle the potential of this beautiful country.

But of course it has not been a universally bleak picture, and your generosity has made a huge difference for a lot of people. So we begin our update offerings to you with stories from our work of community support, both to individuals and to organizations that ably and bravely attempt to create some kind of safety net for those in dire need. Along the way, the beauty and dignity of common Burmese people have deeply touched and inspired us. With these updates, we hope they touch and inspire you as well!

Two Monks' Tuition School

Kids in Laydaungkan (the village by CMMC) don't have it easy. Even if their parents can afford to send them to school, the present Burmese educational system seems set up to frustrate aspirations, rather than to nurture them. The schools are so underfunded and understaffed that kids need to spend hours outside of formal classes taking extra tuition, simply in order to learn their basic lessons.



Taking an exam is a headache anywhere; in Burma there are extra challenges.

Last year we met two remarkable monks, U Thein Obhasa and U Vepolla, who had set up a tuition centre at their monastery. Both had been successful in their careers as laymen, and now that they were monks wanted to do something useful to help others instead of themselves. Roughly translated, the Burmese name of the monastery means 'the finishing of past kamma'—and obviously these two monks were determined to change both their own lives and those of the kids around them! We had offered them dāna for a well and were impressed by how organized these monks were, and how quickly it had been built.

So we weren't so surprised when we saw that they had accomplished much more in addition to just the well! This had been a big success, and with the accompanying water tank there is enough water so that even in the dry season, the monks are able to offer water to the many people living nearby who do not have any.

But in addition to that, there were big piles of bricks in the yard (a gift from Burmese donors) ready to be used for a new building that will house the classrooms for the many students who come for tuition. New toilets have also been offered since last year, and the grounds were spotlessly clean.



The joy of having a place to learn together!

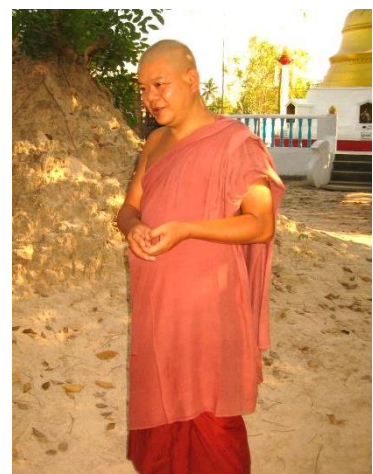


The aspiring 10th Standard students. L to R: Ma Mai Waing Bo, Maung Wei Wei, U Thet Aung (teacher), Maung Kyozya Aung, Maung Ton Ton Nyaing, and Maung Shai Htoo Laing

There are now more than 160 kids who come for tuition, from tiny kindergarteners all the way up to 10th standard students. Several new bamboo classroom buildings were alive with kids of all ages loudly memorizing their lessons from either one of the monks or from lay teachers. There is an urgency and hopefulness in their study—and a lack of competitiveness. Learning here is a group activity, done together with the eagerness and intensity borne of knowing the lack of it.

U Thet Aung, The teacher of the 10th standard class, introduced us to the 5 kids (four boys and one girl) he was tutoring. The all-important 10th standard exam was only 22 days away, and the 'heat was on' for these kids! They were too intimidated by all of us foreigners to say much, but one of the boys shyly volunteered that he hoped to become an engineer. The boys were not going home, but staying and sleeping in a rustic bamboo shack next to one of the classrooms. The parents are very poor and can't support them much, so the monks share their almsround food twice a week so the kids have dinner.

The senior of the two monks, U Thein Obhasa, had practiced meditation in the Mahasi tradition and told us his plans to teach the children about Buddhism and meditation during the hot season when schools are closed—there was no thought of rest!



U Thein Obhasa (In the background are the pagodas at the monastery, one modern and one ancient)



Releasing potential—no small gift!

When we asked if he was happy doing this work, and he told us “Happy or unhappy is not important for a monk. What is important is what I do for the students.” But he also told us that he had recently been ill, and when the kids came to visit him he felt very touched and satisfied with what he was doing. When we asked if he had ideas for the future, he said he wants to help the kids in the neighborhood whose parents can’t support them to go to school—and to bring some children from an orphanage north of Yangon to stay. Obviously, there is momentum here, and it is wonderful to be able to contribute to it!

Aspirations Fulfilled

U Sujana also has momentum! He works with Sayadaw U Indaka in Thaleba to administer the education fund and lending library, and is also in charge of his own monastery near Mandalay, supporting both novices and lay orphans. Having come from a very poor background himself, U Sujana is devoted to the cause of opening doors to kids through education. Last year we had started a separate education fund to support the poor students staying there, and it has been an unqualified success.



U Sujana at his monastery,

We knew he was interested in supporting the aspirations of kids who wanted to pursue higher education, so we were keen to discuss this with him. After some futile (and very Burmese) attempts to connect, we were surprised to get a phone call from him when we were visiting Pagan in late January. He was travelling down from Mandalay by car just to meet with us, and would soon arrive. Clearly he wanted to connect with us too, but we were also amazed—it is at least a 4 hour drive in each direction!

And he had a lot to share. This year in addition to the novices at the monastery, he has 20 students staying with him who are from conflict areas north east of Mandalay. One of these is a young man who expects to pass his 10th standard examinations this year, which would allow him to attend university. U Sujana has also been financially supporting 2 women medical students, one in her final year and one in her 2nd year. Although Burmese medical school fees are infinitesimal by global standards (about 118 USD per month for the 10 months of the school year), this is unaffordable for the vast majority of the population—including these girls’ parents. So we offered enough to fully support all of these bright young students, and if this arrangement is successful, in future years we will explore the possibility of setting up a ‘special’ education fund here, specifically dedicated for supporting aspiring young women and men who want to attend University but who cannot afford to do so, especially in the fields of



Many doctors in Burma are women, devoted to serving their villages and communities

Medicine, Dentistry, and Engineering.

U Sujana was very enthusiastic about this possibility, and said that the youngsters at his monastery as well as students from Thaleba would greatly benefit from such a fund. Professional



Some of the kids getting educational support from U Sujana's education fund

education will open huge doors for these kids, and we are excited about the possibility of giving them the keys. And many others back home will eventually benefit, too, once the graduates go back to their villages to serve and help. Given the allure of modern city life, we had assumed this might not happen so much—but we're often proved wrong (and deeply touched) when students tell us that what they most want to do is to go home to their villages and 'give back'!

The setting of the dāna offering to U Sujana's education fund (the courtyard of the hotel where we were staying) seemed slightly surreal, but U Sujana

seemed as unfazed by this as by his marathon 8-hour commute to meet with us. A few months later, I received an email from one of his supporters, expecting to find photos of the students—but instead it was a meticulously detailed accounting of how the dāna was being used, an indication of U Sujana's priorities, as well as his careful integrity.

Helping Hands—and Networking New Possibilities

For some years we have supported the work of Helping Hands in their education projects in Yangon that support poor kids by paying fees and expenses so that they can go to government schools. Glen and Claire are teachers themselves and so they know first-hand the power and importance of a good education. But this year their focus has shifted significantly, in part because of conversations they had with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi who advised them to concentrate on supporting monastic schools. So now three monastic schools in Yangon receive donations from Helping Hands, and this year they are extending their outreach to the Mon and Shan states—which automatically increases the scope of our support of these incredibly important schools, at a time when education is more important than ever.

Glen and Claire also shared some information with us about new connections that will allow us to better assist bright but needy kids who want to pursue higher education. When we mentioned the many challenges that face kids wanting to go to university, Glen told us of a worthwhile alternative, an NGO that is part Swiss and part Myanmar that offers a three year apprenticeship program based on the Swiss model of technical training. Coincidentally, just the week before I had learned of



These Shan girls are coming of age at in a challenging time

this NGO from Florent Robert, another teacher friend in Yangon, and he had very kindly arranged a visit to CVT for me later that week.

CVT and Shwe Sabwe

In fact, Florent took an entire afternoon off in order to introduce me to the staff of two NGOs in Yangon that have free training programs: CVT (The Centre for Vocational Training, mentioned above), and another NGO that trains kids in the hospitality industry, Shwe Sabwe.



English class for the 1st year hospitality apprentices. U Nyi Nyi is first from the left.

At CVT, we were met by the publicity and outreach manager, U Nyi Nyi, who told us about the work of CVT, and showed us around. Kids are placed in paid apprenticeships in five different specialties (electrical, metal work, cabinetry, hospitality, and office administration) with companies who work in partnership with CVT, and have classroom work and theoretical training once a week at CVT. The training is of very high quality, and after completing the programme students usually get managerial positions in their companies. If students want to enrol but do not already have a job with one of these companies, they can apply anyway—CVT will try to find places for them, and about 25% of these applicants are accepted.

All the teachers and staff are Burmese, but the curriculum, the design, and the organization of CVT are based on a Swiss model. It was uncanny to be in downtown Yangon but to *feel* as though we could have been in Zürich—everything was so well organized and so ‘together’! U Nyi Nyi and the rest of the staff were naturally very proud of the many successes of CVT and know they are on the leading edge of vocational training in Burma.



And it's revision time for the electricians!

After telling us about the programmes, U Nyi Nyi took us to some of the classrooms to meet the students and teachers. We walked in to the 2nd year hospitality class (which was mostly women) as they were polishing their English skills, and I was impressed by their brightness and ability. There was a bright and bubbly atmosphere here—and a positivity that comes from being allowed to bloom. The classroom next door was quieter and more intense—it was the 3rd year Electrical class preparing for their final exams, which were to be in a few weeks. They were friendly but focused, much more interested in work than us!

Looking ahead, in November or December this year, U Nyi Nyi and I plan to visit ‘our’ nunnery schools so that he can speak directly to the kids, letting them know that their horizons can be much broader than the factory-lined roads on the edge of Yangon.



Next, Florent took me to an equally impressive programme that trains students in the restaurant trade in an 11-month intensive residential programme. Shwe Sabwe (“Golden Table”) is the brainchild of François Stupon, a French restaurateur, and runs it as a very upmarket commercial restaurant and artisan hotel in the wealthy Inya Lake area of Yangon. With expert training and supervision, the students prepare all the meals and run the restaurant, and Shwe Sabwe has an excellent reputation for quality and service that matches the high prices on the menu! Tables are frequently booked out for both lunch and dinner.

We arrived after the lunch shift had finished, and so got to see ‘behind the scenes’. The dining room and garden seating area were beautifully arranged; photos of kids lined the walls, and the décor was very tastefully done. The huge kitchen was spotless and very impressive—and in the stifling March heat we were tempted to linger in the air-conditioned comfort of the pastry kitchen!

The pricy menu has a single purpose: it directly supports every single student. Thirty kids are enrolled each year and have all their expenses paid: lodging, meals, and uniforms are provided to them free of charge. The chef trainees are in particular demand: 100% are employed after they complete their training, in the most expensive hotels in Yangon. Like CVT, Shwe Sabwe does not need our *dāna*, but they are valuable connections—and we hope the seeds we are planting together now will bear excellent fruit later!

This month (May), enrollment has opened for the 2013-14 training, and so we have introduced the staff at Shwe Sabwe to four of the nunnery schools we know, including Zalon Parahita and Daw Yuzana’s School, hoping that there will be graduating students who will be able to benefit from this excellent opportunity.

It may take a while to for the contacts with Shwe Sabwe and CVT to ripen, but we are excited by the possibility that they can help to bring out the potential of the many students who will never be doctors or engineers, but who want to *do* something with their lives. It’s heartbreaking to see the potential of so many students being stifled by lack of opportunity, and we are grateful and happy to be able to share something that can help these kids learn about new opportunities that will allow them to more fully bloom.



Shwe Sabwe: another world, and the open door for potential chefs and restaurateurs

Individual Support (Ma Khin Than Nwe and Ko Htoo Ko Ko)



Ma Khin Than Nwe

We told you last year about these two promising students whom we'd supported in furthering their education. Following these bright young people as they've navigated through the dysfunctional system of higher education in Burma has been a sobering lesson for us—vividly showing how cruelly stifled much the youthful potential in this country is.

Ma Khin Than Nwe was in her final year of secondary school when her father died and she had had to quit school for a job sewing in a nearby garment factory to support her mother and siblings. MIA dāna last year allowed her to return to school, and she was one of only two students in her class to pass the all-important 10th Standard examinations, thus earning a place in university. She wanted to study engineering, but because the exams had been exceptionally challenging last year, she hadn't received the necessary high marks.

But with our support, she has been attending Dagon University in Yangon this year. This requires a 1 ½ - hour trip by bus in each direction, and extra time away from home for tuition. Meanwhile at home, her mother (who had been struggling to hold things together who has no real understanding of the value of education) 'put her foot down' saying that Ma Khin Than Nwe next year must stop her studies so that she can return to the garment factory in order to support the family. Kids in Burma can do a 'university degree' via distance learning, but it only requires 2 weeks of study per year and is hardly better than nothing at all. Ma Khin Than Nwe clearly did not want to do this, but in Burmese culture she must obey her mother's wishes.

The situation for Ko Htoo Ko Ko is also convoluted, but the obstructions have come from another, more official, quarter. We had helped him and his family with the expenses to undertake the complicated process of applying for a position at university, and he *had* the good marks to study engineering. Everything seemed to be going well until the very end when it turned out that because he had not immediately entered university after he had passed the 10th standard exam, he was no longer eligible! So he enrolled in distance learning in Chemistry and loves it—but continues to work in construction in order to support his family. Much of the time he is away at Naypidaw, the new capital of Burma, because building work there is lucrative and easy to get. There are still funds remaining from what we had offered to him last year, and he uses these for books and transportation for the fortnight that he must attend classes in person. When we asked



Ko Htoo Ko Ko on a visit home in January



Building is booming everywhere in Burma now

what he wanted to do, he said he wants to continue what he is doing now, even after finishing his studies—this is all he knows and can imagine doing.

So Ma Khin Than Nwe and Ko Htoo Ko Ko both seemed to us to be ‘back to square one.’ The developments for these talented kids was very disappointing, so we immediately began to explore other ways to open doors for them that were outside the box—namely CVT.

U Nyi Nyi at CVT kindly arranged for Ma Khin Than Nwe to apply for the upcoming session, even though it was past the official deadline. When she was reading the CVT brochures, a look of wonder crossed her face and we could tell that she had never imagined the possibility of training and working at the same time. She quietly said to me “Why have I never heard about this?!” She was excited but also clearly nervous and tentative about going *all* the way downtown to drop off her application and for her interview! Even though on the surface she seems a poised and confident young woman, it was painfully obvious then just how narrow her world has been.



Laydaungkan is a short distance but light years away from the bustle of downtown Yangon

Sometimes MIA can help with funds, and sometimes we help by simply being in the right place at the right time, with the right connections to bring people together! Rather than seeing the difficulties these kids face as a setback, we take it as an important reminder of how difficult it is to bridge the cultural gap, and how it is sometimes necessary to work over a long period of time before we see the results we hope for. Over and over again we have had to re-learn how important it is to be sensitive to the cultural and economic context the communities we work in: these must be recognized, appreciated, and respected if we are to make any difference at all.

One of the biggest differences of all is attitudinal: what shines in so many people we meet while offering dāna are the beautiful qualities of patience and quiet perseverance. Here in Burma, difficulties are met by flowing with conditions—skilfully and quietly working ‘around’ challenges rather than confronting them head-on. It is not passivity but common sense, and though things take more time this way, obstacles inevitably change. We at MIA cannot help but absorb this attitude, and we are committed to quietly being here for those we serve, doing our best to see them through to success!



With Metta,
Virañani

