

Metta In Action Update—July 2013 (4A)

Together We Can Do Anything!

(Support for Nuns)



From the very beginning, support for nunneries has been at the core of Metta In Action’s work, and each year our activities in this area seem to expand—and this year was no exception. We made donations to 39 nunneries—thus supporting a total of almost 1500 women and girls. It is amazing to see how much has changed since right after Cyclone Nargis in 2008 when Ven. Ariya Ñani and I spontaneously offered to 3 nunneries—and shortly afterwards to 9 more. At the time 12 felt like a lot! But since then, the numbers have crept up little by little, and here we all are, five years later, making a lot of difference to more people than any of us could have imagined!

The range of conditions of these nunneries varies widely: some of the recent additions to our dāna roster are incredibly basic, while many of the ones that we’ve been supporting for four or five years have vastly better living conditions than they once did (see MIA Update “Momentum in Action”, December 2012). It is our hope and our dream that this process can continue, so that everyone eventually realizes the same high standard of comfort and hygiene. This may be a way



Ar Sasanaramsi Nunnery, a pile of bricks heralds another leap forward—an expanded hostel for young nuns.

off yet, but with the help of your ongoing generosity, already so many nuns the have made leaping progress towards this goal!

Sometimes running theme develops as we go around to the nunneries—for example, two years ago it seemed like everyone needed toilets. This year, one of the themes was *bricks*: there is a very satisfying building boom going on at many nunneries, so as time went on we began to see piles of them almost everywhere we went—and many of these stacks of bricks were for new structures made possible by your dāna!

We wish we could give you the details of every offering, but at this point it would require a small book rather than a short update. So here in Part A are a few vignettes—some highlights of our offerings, to give you a taste of what we are all accomplishing together. Part B of the update is coming to you separately; it has no words, but at least one photo from most of the nunneries you support. Please enjoy the virtual journey with us!

Sukharama Nunnery

One of our first offerings to nunneries this year began with a visit to a ‘new’ nunnery (new to MIA, that is). It was an especially sweet visit because of the old and special connection between the abbess of this nunnery, Daw Sukhesi, and Ven. Ariya Ñani and Marjo Oosterhoff. Daw Sukhesi lives at Chanmyay Yeiktha, and was there when both Ven. Ariya Ñani and Marjo (then Ven. Aggañani) were ordained in the early 1990s. In fact, it had been Daw Sukesi who had shaved both their heads before their ordinations. When we learned from our friend Mimmi that Daw Sukesi had started her own nunnery a short drive from CMMC, we wanted to visit and support *her*!

It took a bit of navigation, but we finally found Sukharama near the far end of a dusty road, off the highway and down a confusing maze of little side streets. Six years ago Daw Sukesi



Daw Sukesi~A beacon of mettā!



A nuns' hostel under construction at Sukharma

had chosen the land because it was quiet, and until very recently it was far away from the bustle of town. But Yangon is growing fast—and this area, once a pastoral landscape of paddy fields, has irreversibly changed into a patchwork of house lots, markets, and monasteries.

Daw Sukesi still lives at Chanmyay Yeiktha, fulfilling her duties of supporting the many yogis there. She said (with a loyalty that is typical in Burma) she will continue to do so until Chanmyay Sayadaw dies. So with uncomplaining good humor, each week or so she takes the bone-jarring



Learning to read and write Burmese

1½-hour journey in each direction in a standing-room only bus to get here.

It would be easy excuse Daw Sukesi for wanting (at 74 years of age) a small quiet place to retire. But, *no*: instead, she has created a place of training and refuge for 25 young nuns from the Shan state, including many from different ethnic groups. She told us that one of her father's friends is from the Palaung ethnic group and it was he who brought the kids to live at Sukharama, far away from unsafe

conflict zones. In Daw Sukesi's absence, the girls are trained under the skillful guidance of the resident sub-abbess, Daw Ñanesi.

So rather than being a quiet retirement retreat house, Sukharama is a youthful hive of activity! In a half-finished building next to entrance, we found some of the nuns diligently finishing the afternoon's Burmese lessons, while outside other nuns were in the midst of afternoon chores. Workers were there too, laying bricks or hammering away on several buildings in the compound, which were in various stages of completion.

Daw Sukesi told us that they have a very deep well and a pump, so the water is drinkable—but they needed a water tank, and of course finishing the construction is a big priority. While they have some local support, it is never enough to finish all the buildings in one go, and much of the *dāna* they get goes to directly everyday expenses such as food and electricity. So in the usual Burmese way, they are making do, living amongst the construction.



The nunnery shrine



These nuns may be young—but they're getting plenty of training...

Inside the main assembly hall we found a beautiful (and very feminine) shrine—this is the place where the community gathers to chant and meditate twice a day, and to eat. When we were about to present our *dāna*, the young nuns filed in so the entire community would be present for the formal offering and sharing of blessings, which they chanted together admirably!

We were impressed by the quality of the training these youngsters were obviously receiving from Daw Ñanesi, but also by the gentle *mettā* feeling that pervades Sukharama, in spite of mostly being a construction zone. We noticed a teddy bear perched on one of the upstairs windows of the nuns' hostel—a mute testament to the

love and care that the children who come Sukharama receive.

On top of everything else she does to support all the young nuns, each summer Daw Sukesi teaches a week-long meditation retreat here; last year 75 people came, which is of course a lot of work for everyone.



...but there's TLC, too!

Some ‘retirement’! But this is often the way it is in Burma. There is value placed on the wisdom of age—and monastics who are healthy enough to continue to dedicate their lives to sharing do so well into their 90s. We hope it is so for Daw Sukesī!

Effort and Progress: a Tale of Two Nunneries

Seinyaungkyi Nunnery

One day in March, Mimmi and I had gone to pay a visit her parents, who live in an apartment in Yangon. After lunch, as we came down to the street we encountered a group of nuns who were collecting alms, and I was delighted and surprised to realize that we knew these nuns! They were from Seinyaungkyi Nunnery, the ones who had touched us so deeply last year when we visited their little place north of CMMC (See “We have never received so much!” MIA Update, May 2012). They had been offered lunch, and were back on the road to spend the rest of the torrid afternoon walking in the sun for alms. To do this twice a week is hard and unrelenting work, but that’s what it takes for the nuns to simply get enough support for food and clothing. Capital building projects are another story: these take many years of saving and the support of countless donors.



A wonderful surprise encounter

Seinyaungkyi nunnery is just beginning to expand, and like many of the nunneries we have visited, they are in the midst of a time that is both exciting and challenging. There are the discomforts of living in a perennial construction zone, and the many difficulties of coordinating an extended building project. Anyone who has ever built their own home will understand the situation—to a point. But it’s unlikely that any of us in the West has ever had the experience of building a home funded by meager and unreliable almround donations, while at the same time supporting and taking care of a growing number of unrelated children!



The bricks dwarf the house in Seinyaungki’s tidy compound

But one of the things we have many times—at Seinyaungkyi and elsewhere—is that the no-one makes much of a fuss about such growing pains, even if they are prolonged. This is generally the case anyway, with many building projects in Burma taking years to finish completely. You build until you run out of cash and then just wait until more comes in and you can start again. It takes effort, and patience, and persistence—that is all, ‘no big deal’!

And the nuns at Seinyaunkyi are no strangers to situations that require immense patience. It had taken 10 years for the Abbess, Daw Sirichanda, to finish her Dhammacariya degree (which is given to monks and nuns once they have successfully finished a rigorous course of study to become Dhamma teachers). As she carefully pulled out the box to show us the precious stamp offered to all who hold this coveted and challenging degree, I could only imagine the amount of perseverance she had needed to keep going. And she and co-abbess, Daw Singi, had saved for

over 20 years to gather enough from their alms to buy this little piece of land. They had started their journey into the construction realms in March of last year, after we visited and offered them a relatively small donation—so after only being able to dream of doing more, and of building a more substantial structure, now they could begin to actually *plan* it!



Daw Sirichanda and Daw Singi; in the background is a photo of Daw Sirichanda receiving her Dhammacariya degree

So last October they had called in to see me at CMMC with a picture of the beautiful two story building they were hoping to create. Some months later when all of us arrived to visit and to offer *dāna* to the nunnery, we could see that the threshold between thinking and doing had been crossed, and the task had begun! Crowding the corners of the tiny but immaculate compound were stacks of bricks, and Daw Sirichanda said they would be laying the foundations in April. She told us that little by little it will take perhaps 3 years to finish.

And of course now with the promise of more space, there is a population boom on the horizon. Already, with still the same amount of room as before, they have 3 more young nuns living here than last year—and they told us their teacher (who is from Shwesettaw, in central Myanmar) has announced that he will soon send 7-8 more children.

The two head nuns will have the task of figuring out how to accommodate all this change. The kids, however, are shielded from all these concerns—held in the supportive and re-assuring container of their routine of daily pujas, Dhamma studies, school, and almsrounds.

As we went outside after our visit to look around, three of the young nuns came home from school (they attend Zaloon Parahita School, about a 20 minute walk away). They were ‘on a mission’: there were sweeping chores to attend to and homework to do. But they politely took a moment to pose for a photo on their way inside. Five minutes later, having set aside the books and formal outer robes, they were back outside, making a big game of keeping the compound clean.

For countless other children in this struggling country, there is often neither enough to eat nor the luxury of playtime. So for these girls the presence of this refuge is unspeakably precious; it is a place where they are held and buffered from the larger forces that rock the adult world around them, safe to just be ‘normal kids.’ Over the next few years, as the elder nuns here make the huge effort to provide this space (and grow their vision) they will have many needs—and so we look forward to the privilege of supporting *them*!



Home from school—and soon to be a lot less formal!



Hard at work learning English

Paññasingi Nunnery

Just a little down the road from Seinyaungkyi is Paññasingi Nunnery—and this year we were treated to a vision of what that kind of effort looks like when it pays off. This nunnery is much larger and more developed than Seinyaungkyi—55 nuns live here, ranging in age from 5 to 72—but it started small and has gradually grown to its present size. Last year when we offered dāna, they were still in the throes of finishing their biggest building, and the nunnery had a slightly chaotic feel to it with pallets everywhere and all the young nuns working in the compound to help the process along. This year, the abbess, Daw Paññasami, said everyone had to try very hard to get things fixed up.

Obviously, all that trying worked! This year the scene was entirely different. The compound was peaceful, spotless, and even landscaped in places—and the nuns had finished the building, which of course they wanted to show us. We went upstairs to the shrine room to find afternoon sunlight pouring through the finished windows (they had used part of our dāna from last year for that)—and a small group of teenaged nuns were receiving English lessons at the back of the room. While we made our offering and in spite of the kerfuffle of the chanting and sharing of merit, they did not break their concentration once.

When we went back downstairs, Daw Paññasami showed off the new washing shed—which was full of what looked like miles of pink and orange laundry flapping in the breeze. Two pre-teen nuns were washing clothes in the Burmese way—by kneading and pounding them on the ground—but it was a bit of a game; these youngsters had not yet grown up enough to succumb to boredom!



Loads of laundry—and not a washing machine in sight!

Daw Paññasami told us they acquired the small parcel of land that housed the washing shed to extend the nunnery a bit. The buildings for living are complete, but they needed an extra place for tuition and a special study area for the nuns who don't speak Burmese and are slow to learn. Now they also have a bit more space for the little ones to play—and for all that laundry!



Before: What a crummy place to live!

Saddhamaramsi Nunnery

We are well aware that life for these nuns is not easy, even if they have sufficient support. But sometimes their situation can only be described as tragic—and Saddhamaramsi Nunnery's predicament certainly fit that description. We had learned of this nunnery from Daw Sumanacari at Appamada Nunnery School; 10 of the nuns living there attend classes at her school.

She took us to see the place, and we found it to be in total shambles—looking like it was in the process of being demolished. In fact, it was. The nuns had

‘bought’ this piece of land behind a pagoda, but they had recently discovered that both the sale and deed were actually fraudulent. They had been cheated! The land still legally belonged to the pagoda, and the trustees had told the nunnery that they had to move, and soon: within the next 5 days.

Fortunately they had managed to acquire a plot of land about 5 minute’s walk from Appamada School, but of course had to pay top price for it—and so now they had massive debt compounding their already high level of stress and difficulty.

There were 26 nuns ‘living’ here amongst what was an incredible mess, on land with no water. Most of the young nuns were kids were from the Shan State, of Shan and Padaung ethnicity. As we talked, Daw Sumanacari very tenderly caressed the shoulder of one of the young nuns, and as we were leaving she touched her heart and said she had cried at seeing this difficult situation.



Daw Sumanacari with two of her pupils at the old Sadhhamaramsi

The new land is small, but of much better quality, with water and four other nunneries nearby to provide a vital network of support and connection with other nuns. Within days after we offered them dāna, toilets were being dug and a structure was being built—and when I went by some 6 weeks later, there was a passable home in place for all the nuns. It was still being finished, but had a concrete floor and solid walls—infinitely better than what they left behind. The abbess, Daw Ayecari, told us that the structure is solid enough to renovate and hopes to someday build upwards!



And after: the new nunnery is a vast improvement!

Some of the littlest nuns immediately gathered around, eager to have their photos taken, and it was incredibly heartening to see their sweetness and resilience. The atmosphere at the new place was totally different from that of where they had been before, and the young nuns said they were happy in their new home. Of course it will be some time before the nunnery ‘climbs out of the hole’ completely, but thanks to Daw Sumanacari’s intervention and your help, they are on their way. The abbess, Daw Ayecari, said that little by little they will be able to finish.

They live on a lane that is lined with small nunneries—and so I went later to offer dāna to each of these in turn, and discovered a close community of nunneries coexisting quite harmoniously. At Chanmyaygonjee Nunnery two doors down, they used our dāna to build a lovely turquoise toilet block, and some of the other nunneries said they were very happy to get our support as they needed to build better buildings to withstand the flooding that comes to this land every year during the rainy season. We look



The new toilets at Chanmyaygonjee

forward to being able to continue to help all these nuns along!



Daw Issariyañani (L) amongst the bricks

Dhammarama Nunnery—New Frontiers

We had been very impressed with this nunnery last year. In spite of its very simple bamboo dwellings, the place was immaculate and beautifully landscaped. And the abbess, Daw Issariyañani, struck us as extremely competent.

This year they told us that all they needed was funds for a better building; they planned to start small and expand if necessary. We liked the sound of that, and offered enough to give them a good start—and I was amazed 5 weeks later to

visit and find that it was already well on the way to completion. Describing these nuns as ‘together’ is an understatement!

I was visiting because I had received a donation specifically for solar energy, and wanted to see if it would be possible to offer individual solar systems to nunneries—and Dhammarama Nunnery seemed like a good possible ‘guinea pig.’ So I had come to find out if

they were interested, and was delighted by their response—yes, indeed! They live near the end of the road, far from the main line and the nearest transformer, so the power they get is even weaker and more unreliable than usual (which is saying something!).



Testing the line before the big moment

very small system—but it gives plenty power for lights and a DVD player.

The very tidy new brick house was already nearly finished, and the technicians went to work, clambering onto the roof with the panels and drilling holes for wires into the beams inside. Within 3 hours everything was done, and it was time to turn on the lights! It was a magic moment, knowing that now the nuns can reliably read and study at night without the need to use a noisy, smelly, and polluting diesel generator. There was a remarkably short technical lesson—the system requires almost no maintenance and will be very easy for the nuns to run. Of



The solar age comes to Dhammarama

It was a relatively simple matter to arrange the purchase, and so a few weeks later I was back, along with 3 technicians from Asia Solar (the company we had worked with when we installed solar light in Thaleba, Sayadaw U Indaka’s village). The 2 eldest nuns and the littlest nun were waiting for us, and watched with fascination as we unloaded these strange pieces of technology and brought them into the compound. We had bought a



...And the very formal portrait proving that the lights do indeed work!

course, they were totally thrilled with the result. Daw Issariyañani could not contain a grin as she admired the lights and said “Wun tha ba deh!!” (“I am happy!!”).



[The serene compound at Myanaung Nunnery](#)

arrived in the middle of Abhidhamma examinations, but even so two nuns soon materialized to show us around. Of course, first they took us upstairs to the examination room—which was as big as any university gymnasium and full of nuns huddled over their test papers (I imagined sweating even more than they normally would be in the March heat). To see so many rows of young women showing off the depth of their knowledge was thrilling!

Then we went to pay respects and make the MIA offering to 2 of the senior nuns—who together had spent almost 180 years in robes! The nunnery is run by a committee of 8 elder nuns, one of whom is Daw Ñanacari’s niece. There was a wonderful vibe here, and the most senior nun was a real mettā beacon! And after our offering, we got to receive Daw Ñanacari’s blessing chant from as close to the source as possible.

When these venerable Grandmother nuns were chanting, it was an incredible experience. They were really ‘belting it out,’ with joy and an incredible energy that belied their advanced age!

It felt incredibly fortunate to be able to meet and pay respects to these elders—and to contribute to their work with our offering. Daw Khemacari, the most senior nun, and Daw Ñanacari’s niece, died in April at the ripe old age of 98 years old and 94 years as a nun!

Myanaung Nunnery

When we offer to nuns, no matter where, we are generally treated to a beautiful Burmese blessing chant that is unique to the nuns. I had always wondered—where did this chant come from? In March, I found out. Our friend Mimmi had suggested that a visit to the Myanaung Nunnery in Yangon, and so in early March, we went to make an offering.

Established about over 60 years ago by Daw Ñanacari, Myanaung Nunnery (actually more correctly called “Samiddhodayasukhitarama Daw Ñanacari Myanaung Nunnery”!) is a well-established and highly respected study nunnery with 270 nuns. The compound is a large oasis in the city, with beautiful grounds and a number of well-kept multi-story buildings. It turned out that we had



[Examination time at Myanaung Nunnery](#)



Daw Khemacari tells us of Daw Nānacari's teachings and about the founding of the nunnery.

The accomplishment of these nuns over the years is incalculable—this nunnery has been a ‘root nunnery’ for many nuns all over Burma (including some that we support). And now they in turn are out in the wider world, following the footsteps of their elders and starting nunneries of their own, goodness following goodness.

Cooperation and Community

So from these roots many seeds have been planted. And the longer we know and support the nuns, the more we see and appreciate the strong web of relationships amongst them. It is not a culture of competition, but of deep mutual support. Sometimes nuns in different nunneries

are related (sisters, half-sisters, cousins), but not always—the mutual support often transcends ties of blood and biological family. As nuns, we are all daughters of the Buddha!

The mutual support takes many forms. Early on, we had noticed that when a nunnery holds a marathon 3 day (24 hour a day!) Paṭṭhāna chanting ceremony, all the other nunneries nearby invariably lend a hand and join the chanting. And frequently nuns will share scarce resources (such as potable water in an area with few wells) with other less fortunate nunneries nearby. Nunneries that are in close proximity to each other are often especially cooperative. Each time we've gone to the Nwe Kwe village to offer to the many small nunneries there, we are touched by the family feeling amongst them: they cooperate in so many ways to take care of each other and to further their studies. We are often shown around during a visit there by several abbesses together.



At the end of a visit, Nwe Kwe nuns from several nunneries say goodbye



Daw Uttara and Daw Rupa

This year we witnessed a sweet example of this family feeling one day when we went to some of the nunneries near Shwe Oo Min Dhamma Centre. At Chanmyay Thayar, we had just offered dāna to Daw Rupasingi when Daw Uttarasingi (the Abbess from the neighboring nunnery, Sasanasukhacari Laputta Nunnery) arrived to take part in the Paṭṭhāna chanting that was happening at the time. There was a warm and delightful exchange, with Daw Uttara delighting in the dāna that Chanmyay Thayar had just received. After chatting for a while longer we left, only to encounter the two of them again much later walking together on the road leading towards Mingalagonwei Nunnery. They told us they were on their way there to see the Abbess, Daw Obhasi, who was not feeling well—so that they could give her a massage!



The joy of working together for a common goal

The Power of Working Together

The afternoon before I was to fly out of Burma for my annual time in the US, Mimmi and I spent a few hours visiting several nunneries, so that I could get photographs and check to see what progress had been made. Along the way, we had to pass by Chanmyay Thayar Nunnery, and saw that everybody was outside, helping construct a path to the new building that was being built (partly with *dāna* from MIA). Some of the nuns had to shovel sand into old nun's robes and were carrying it over to where the path was being built—it was hard and grubby work, but they were laughing and working happily together as a harmonious team. The incident seemed to so perfectly capture what we see in one form or another at all these nunneries: the precious phenomenon of people working towards a common goal without competition, but with love and joy. Whether dragging sand or raising orphans, they work *together*!

I couldn't help but remember how not so long ago (in 2008) all the Chanmyay Thayar nuns lived in one tiny little bamboo hut. They have accomplished so much this way! And now they were embarking on another round of growth. And, yes, to have come as far as they have *has* been a lot of hard work—as it has been for all the other nunneries, too. And the work will continue to be challenging as they grow further. But with the help we offer, the nuns can relax a little because they know that at least the basics are taken care of. As Daw Uttara from the Sasanasukhacari Laputta nunnery told us, “Because of this [MIA] offering we will have clothes, we will be able to eat, and we will have a building!”

Perhaps you discount the importance of your offering, thinking it a small thing. But it has done all this! Every offering (no matter how much or little) is an indispensable part of the whole MIA picture. Together we can emulate these nuns, and as we link hands to work as a harmonious team to help the nuns and villagers, we can accomplish *so* much more than we would be able to alone!

Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu! With profound gratitude, and mettā to you all~
Ven.Virañani

