

Offering Bright Futures

(Support for Education)



Aung Yadanar Shwe Oh Monastery School

It was one of those ‘interesting’ moments and the beginning of a very Burmese adventure. Carol, Sally Clough, and I, plus Ma Thwet (a helper from CMMC who had kindly offered to interpret) had driven from Yangon to a town about 2½ hours away, with directions to a rendezvous point where we were to be guided to our destination, a very remote monastery school. Over the last several years we had offered dana to this school but we had never managed to visit—but this time we could! We (quite naively as it turned out) had the impression that we would be able to drive all the way there, but at the rendezvous we were greeted by a 3 motorcycles (‘taxis’!)—and a 2 mile dirt path.

We knew the entire school would be waiting to greet us, so we had to put aside any misgivings, hop on the back of one of these skittish machines and hang on for the ride. Whole Burmese families routinely travel this way, but for us it wasn’t so familiar to sit sideways on the back of a motorcycle as it bumped and slid on the sandy track with nothing but a steep bank between us and the nearest rice paddy. I had taken great care to tightly wrap and tuck my robes before I got on, fearing an



"Hold on *here!*" ...Learning the fine art of riding side-saddle on a motorcycle.

undignified entrance to the school, less bits and pieces of clothing blown off along the way. That never happened, of course, and finally we all arrived (in one piece) at Aung Yadanar Shwe Oh Monastery School.

The flat plain of rice paddies seemed to go on forever; this really was the 'middle of nowhere'! But finally we came into the tree-shaded school compound, to be greeted by a huge crowd of kids, some dressed in the uniforms that we had offered in a previous year, others in a mish-mash of whatever they happened to have. Classes had been suspended for our visit and the entire student body had assembled to greet us, along with U Indobhasa, whose broad smile may have been partly on account of seeing these foreigners clinging to the back of scooters.

The kids were much shyer, but immensely curious (see cover photo); some of them had never met foreigners before. So their eyes followed us intently as U Indobhasa showed us around the compound. At first they seemed quite solemn, but that was just reticence on account of the very strange visitors. Like kids everywhere, smiles and laughter were close to the surface, especially when we showed them photos we had taken of them and they giggled and angled for space around the camera for a better look.

U Indobhasa grew up in a village not far from here, and had come to CMMC for meditation—which is how we came to know about the school. He had founded it in 2009, knowing first-hand how difficult it was to get an education in such a remote area. The school has 160 students in 1st through 4th Standard, and U Indobhasa told us that day by day more kids were coming.



U Indobhasa, and (L-R) teachers Ma Moe Thusa, Ma Yu Sanda Ton, and Ma Sein Chit Suu.



Your generosity will definitely go a long way towards improving *this!*

Because the school is so remote, there are only 4 teachers who have to rotate amongst the kids as they teach the different subjects. When we went inside the main building, three of them were there grading piles of homework—it looked like an immense amount of work, but the teachers were serenely unfazed by the job, simply doing what needed to be done.

While he and some of the lay helpers showed us around, U Indobhasa told us that the main building as used for everything: the schoolroom, the monks' chanting twice a day, and a few of the kids even

sleep there. We could see that there were a couple of huts for U Indobhasa and his assistant monks, and toilets (some quite basic) for the kids and monks, but the compound was very simple. Next door, a rice field that belongs to the monastery supplies some of the rice for the center.

With the growing school, of course U Indobhasa wants to construct a purpose built classroom building. He told us that he intends to do this a little as a time as donations come in: already he has been able to order iron and cement for the foundation, but it is very difficult as he is far from sources of support. Not to mention the huge challenges of communication and transportation!



The school compound is a slow work in progress, each and every piece of material brought in from afar.

The isolation of this place makes everything harder and more expensive—hiring teachers, getting supplies in and out, and access to building materials. We learned that in the rainy season it is even more difficult to get in and out, as the school is only accessible by small boats at that time.

What has been done here far out in the countryside impressed us deeply, and so we offered your MIA donations with even more heartfelt joy than normal. U Indobhasa is patient, resourceful, and determined. So little by little his goals will certainly be accomplished. And in the meantime your donations have gone a long way to helping these 160 children get a primary education at last!



A classroom transformed at Ananda Metta School.

Ananda Metta Monastery School

A few weeks earlier, we had paid a visit to Ananda Metta School—which only three years before had looked as basic as Aung Yadanar Shwe Oh does now. But once again we were delighted to see the transformation that can happen with support and positive energy. The bright and enthusiastic abbot of this monastery, U Indaka, has a big vision, and each time we return there are new things to see as his vision continues to expand and manifest.

The school was bustling, filled with kids. Now there are 235 students, all attending primary school. U Indaka told us that just that day he had begun to build a hostel for orphan girls. He was inspired to do this because of the terrible fate of these children—many are now taken away out of the country for sex trade in China and Thailand. We had heard veiled references to this from some of the nuns we support, but this was the first time we had heard the sex trade mentioned openly by anyone in Burma. It was a sobering moment.

But at Ananda Metta, U Indaka wants very much to create a safe haven and refuge for orphan girls, run and overseen by ordained women. He enthusiastically told us that the number of girls he will be able to accommodate here will depend how big a building he can build, and that that will depend in turn on how much support he is able to find—he is intending to start with about 11 girls.



Here there is safety, allowing kids to play and to learn.

After we had offered your dana (which he said he will use for the hostel), we went out to see changes since last year. In addition to finished classrooms, there are new rooms for his free clinic, and a separate pharmacy. The clinic is open two days a week, and we were fortunate enough to meet the six volunteer doctors just as they were leaving. They told us that 74 people had been treated that day and that the commonest ailments they treat are hypertension, diabetes, various infections, and TB. U Indaka does not want to stop here—he told us that now he wants to open a hospital!



The Volunteer doctors at the Ananda Metta School Clinic (inset)

His other long-range plans are to build a library that the students can use and to expand the building for the novices. For the moment, though the priority is to fill the land for the girls' hostel and to fence the back of the property for security.

We noticed a new block of toilets for the students, and ongoing general improvements to the campus. He has some regular local support (as we were talking to him, some donors came in with 14 huge bags of rice), but U Indaka told us that it is not easy for him, all by himself, to get enough support. So we were particularly happy to be able to offer to this fantastic school as we all

felt quite inspired by his bright energy and by all he has managed to achieve.

The Two Monks' School

Ananda Metta School and Aung Yadanar Shwe Oh are both a long way from CMMC, but most of the schools we support with your dana are quite a bit closer to home. Right down the dusty road is

the Tuition School we call the “Two Monks Tuition School”—that is not its real name, but the upbeat and positive monks (U Sein Obhasa and U Vepolla) who started this school and who keep it going are close to our hearts, so we like to call it this.

Once again this year, there was a quite lot of change here: the school and monastery continues to grow in leaps and bounds. In December 2013, after being away for 8 months, we were blown away by everything the monks had managed to get done in such a short period of time. A new entrance lead into a paved forecourt flanked by two large new classroom buildings, each with 3 self-contained classrooms.



The transformed Tuition School: now it is a *campus*!



Outside each one, the many pairs of slippers attested to the large number of students inside. We were impressed at the respect and discipline of all the children, and U Vepolla told us that training the students how to properly get along in society is an important part of the work they do. Altogether 250 students now come here to study in the afternoons and evenings—and before big examinations some students even stay until midnight!

The formal state-run schooling is so inadequate that unless students receive this sort of extra tutoring, they would never be able to pass their examinations. Private tuition is quite expensive, but here it is completely free of charge and open to all.

As this wonderful little school continues to grow, we have begun to hear about it out in the community. Two of the nuns from the nearby Laputta Nunnery are studying for their 10th Standard Examinations here, and one of them showed us her Chemistry homework from the school, which looked impressively complicated.

The dana we offered this year will go towards a large 2-storey building to be used as a Dhamma Hall, and to accommodate the many activities of this rapidly growing school. We have been impressed by how U Sein Obhasa and U Vepolla have done much more than ‘just’ teaching kids who come from the village. They offer water to the village, feed the kids who are hungry, and also take in poor children who need a refuge. So there are also several children who stay here all the time; some of these kids have ordained as novices, but most have not.



U Sein Obhasa gives Ariya a tour of the new building site.



U Vepolla, U Sein Obhasa, and Maung Soe Lwin Nyein

In February, U Sein Obhasa introduced us to 9 year-old Soe Lwin Nyein, whom he had formally adopted. Soe Lwin Nyein's mother had died and though his father married again, for the little boy it was a terrible situation: his new step-mother forced him to pay about a dollar each day for the very small amount of food she gave him. He had had to find work collecting plastic bottles and at a jasmine farm to make the money. But now his life is much better and he is able to study and play like the other children at the school. The two monks were

clearly proud of this bright little boy—and he in turn was obviously very happy to be here.

When school is out of session, the monks hold a Buddhist Cultural course, and this year for the first time they also hoped to have computer studies course for the village kids, even though they only had on old desk-top computer. In the Burmese way, they would make do.

But they did not know that we had a surprise up our sleeves: Jamie Hubbard, a friend and professor of Buddhist Studies at Smith College in Amherst, had brought four used laptops to donate! When we brought him to the school to introduce him and to offer the computers, U Sein Obhasa was almost beside himself with astonished delight.



Jamie and Narayan spring the surprise!

Jamie had done all the work to completely refurbish the computers, and had installed all the necessary Burmese fonts—and then later he came back to the school a number of times to offer training so that everyone knew how to use them.



And the very interested and growing audience once the word got out!

As we were showing U Sein Obhasa the computers, I heard quiet footsteps and turned around to find that word had already spread around the school and a growing (and very interested) audience of boys were peering over our shoulders see what the excitement was about. As Burma moves into the 21st Century, this kind of technical training will be essential, so now these 2 remarkable monks can offer even more to the community they serve.

Zaloon Parahita School

Technical training was also on the agenda at Zaloon Parahita Nunnery School. Of all the schools we



Daw Ayesingi and one of the Zalon Parahita teachers check out one of the new computers.

support, this is one of the ones we feel closest to as we've known of this place since 2008 when it was 'only' a nunnery—and MIA has been a major sponsor of the school since the beginning. So we had been to visit a number of times and knew Daw Ayesingi wanted to offer a computer training once school was out in the hot season. But (like the 2 monks' school) she had almost no equipment.

But in mid-January Marjo's friends Maria and Frits came along with us to offer another little surprise. School was in session, and as always the whole place was lively and full of kids. So

Daw Ayesingi invited us into the main room of the nunnery, where we could talk in the relatively peaceful surroundings and under the benevolent gaze of the shrine's Buddha statue.

After telling us the most recent news of the school, Daw Ayesingi mentioned (as an aside) that she still wanted to be able to offer the kids computer courses, although it was still not clear how she would be able to go about doing that. Of course this was the perfect moment for Maria and Frits to spring *their* surprise and offer the two laptops they had brought with them! While receiving them, one of the teachers was literally in tears at their gift. Later in the month Jamie paid a number of visits to set up the computers and to train the teachers how to use them.



Daw Ayesingi, Daw Therañani and some of the young beneficiaries of their efforts, and the generosity of many!

It was an appropriate trading of surprises, as we have often been amazed at how fast this wonderful school has been able to grow. In early



Space for work...

December, I had exceeded my yearly quota of astonishment when I went to visit for the first time in several months and discovered that another new 3-storey classroom building had sprung up, thanks to the same Japanese donors who had offered the first one last year.

So now with just over 600 students, 20 teachers, and classes being held in both buildings, Daw Ayesingi said that her main concern is to have enough each month for the teachers' salaries, which cost over a 1000 USD each month. She has cobbled together some support from a local company (Shine Hope traditional pharmaceuticals),



...And some space for play!

and the government—but both of those sources of support were completely uncertain. So we offered a substantial amount to make up for the expected shortfall.

In addition we had made our regular donation for infrastructure, knowing that it would be used wisely and well: as testimony to this, the nuns and teachers proudly showed us what they had done with our dana from last year: there was a new block of toilets, and a new water tank with an ultraviolet purifier so everyone could drink clean water.

When we asked what else the school needed, Daw Ayesingi mentioned better accommodation for the over 50 nuns who live here, as well as a dining room and kitchen! All this time, while offering to the community, Daw Ayesingi and

her helpers have put themselves last and made do with what they have—knowing that patience will eventually pay off. Once again she told us how much she so much appreciates your steady donations, because they mean that she can sleep a little better at night knowing that support will be there for the most important things.

Daw Ayesingi valiantly manages to keep the school going in spite of her own sometimes poor health, and in spite of the many dramas that are an almost daily occurrence when hundreds of children gather together in one place. She takes it all in stride: from financial challenges to thefts to schoolyard squabbles. She told Ariya and me that to keep it all together, she has to be extremely frugal. And every year it is more obvious to us how badly the school is needed, and how it is now an integral part of the community: almost every nunnery within a 5 Km radius of the school gave us the same answer when we asked where the young nuns go to school, especially in secondary levels from 5th through 10th Standards: “Zaloon!”



Pure water for everyone at Zaloon Parahita School.

Appamada School

Appamada School, which has now been going for almost 4 years, has also become a community magnet—especially for the younger students in Kindergarten through 4th Standards.

Daw Sumanacari’s biggest headache is trying to juggle the needs of the school and the needs of her nunnery on a small plot of land. This year, the school has overflowed into the property across the small lane—in part because one of the classroom buildings had been torn down to make way for a larger two-story structure that will accommodate both the nuns and the school. Fortunately,



New temporary classrooms—same old desire to learn.

the neighbor who owns the land is happy to support the school, and so has given Daw Sumanacari the use of it rent-free. She told us that of course she'd love to buy this piece of property, but could never afford it: the tiny plot of land (only about 10 by 20 meters in size) had been valued at an amount in Burmese Kyat equivalent to about 77,000 US Dollars! I was flabbergasted by this number and asked for confirmation three times, thinking that I had not understood the Burmese numbers correctly. But I *had* been right—obviously, land prices in this area continue to escalate, with no end in sight.

So for as long as necessary, some of the classes will be held in this temporary structure while the new building is constructed at the back of the compound. We made one of our visits to the school in the midst of the break for Christmas and New Year (yes, even in Burma there is a school holiday at this time of year), and Daw Sumanacari was taking the opportunity to begin the building project, and workers were razing the structure in the back part of the school area to make way for the new building. The main classroom building still had the decorations from the exam prize-giving, but it had morphed into a construction area, with all the desks and benches piled together to make the necessary space. She estimates the 2-story building she is starting will cost the equivalent of about 65,000 US Dollars, so it will take some time to complete! We went back several times and could see the footprint of the new structure emerging—eventually, it will become a useable building!



The new structure is beginning to take shape.



A few of the many teachers who *make* the school

And while all this is going on, Daw Sumanacari still has to deal with the ongoing needs of the school. This we could certainly help with! One of the biggest expenses was sponsored by Malaysian and Australian donors, friends of MIA who practice every year at the nearby Shwe Oo Min Centre, who generously offered a large sum to pay the teachers' salaries for the entire year. And a sizable donation though MIA from the Four Friends Group from Canada and the USA was used for physical essentials: a roof over the water tank, a submersible pump for the well, concrete for the floor of the part

of the building that is still dirt, and desks. We are always moved by these offerings and deeply appreciate the commitment of all of you who offer so much.

Other Nunnery School Highlights

We continue to offer substantial donations to 5 other large nunnery schools; each has its own story and its own special ‘flavor,’ but because of the limitations of space, we can only give you a few highlights of these offerings. As all of the schools are between CMMC and Yangon, Ariya and I did a ‘blitz’ one day, visiting the schools one after another. As it had been two years since she had been able to come to Burma, we had saved this special trip until after Ariya’s return. To see all of these schools in a short space of time was incredibly inspiring—literally thousands of children are being given an education at no cost to their families, at schools completely founded on the hard work and faith of a small sisterhood of determined women, the nuns who start and run these amazing places.



First we visited *Sasntisukha Nunnery and School*, which now has 381 students. We immediately noticed a new classroom building across the field from the main complex: clearly, the school, nunnery and medical clinic are all thriving—in spite of the challenges

of funding. Daw Tirisanda told us that paying the teachers’ salaries was a constant worry. The school has a few regular donors, and they get enough for food from the almsrounds of the 127 resident nuns, but there are no guarantees that enough donations would come in to cover all the expenses. She had saved some money to pay the teachers, but it would be gone in a matter of four short months. Her humble, calm, and practical demeanor hides a formidable intelligence—we learned this year that she holds the very prestigious Sadhammajotika degree—so she is not without ideas to keep everything going.



Daw Tirisanda (above) and the new classroom buildings (above, left)



Making the offering at Sukhagami Nunnery School

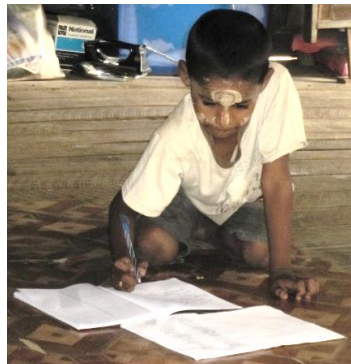
Up the road at *Sukhagami Nunnery and School*, the head nun (Daw Aggañani) was in Yangon for the day so we were greeted by Ma Santacari, one of the 160 resident nuns, who ushered us into a nearby outdoor pavilion. Inside, six nuns sat on the floor to one side, around a low table groaning with stacks of exercise books. They hardly noticed us as we came in—they were cramming for the examinations that would happen later in the week. The hushed and slightly intense pre-examination atmosphere was immediately recognizable and no different from what each of us remembered from

our own days as students. Ma Santacari told us they were preparing for their 10th Standard Exams and that this year 20 students would be taking this exam. In addition over 20 of the nuns were studying for the Dhammacariya degree—and at this time of year when all the examinations take place, they and the 10th Standard nuns are excused from participating in the twice-weekly almsrounds to allow them time to study. The school has a good record of 10th Standard passes, but it is a brutal exam and last year only 3 out of 20 received a passing score. We could tell by the concentration of the students at the table that each of them was doing her best to achieve that goal this year!



Daw Silavati holds it all together for kids like Maung Phayon Kyaw (below R), Kaun Kaun (below L), and hundreds of others.

Next we went over to *Myasingi School*, which is the largest school we support, under the guidance of the remarkable Daw Silavati. Although there are almost 900 students at the school and 150 nuns living here, it was the small things that revealed so much about the compassionate atmosphere of this place. Mya Moe Thet, the little girl whom we pictured in last year's update (see "Like Water for a Thirsty Person," July 2013) is still here and thriving, and this year another foundling has been adopted by one of the nuns. Little Kaun Kaun is about 6 and has had an incredibly hard start in life—he had been discovered abandoned on a rubbish heap, and is mentally disabled. But at least now he is safe and in secure and loving hands. As we went inside to offer our dana we saw another little boy in the corner of the room, intently focusing on his lessons. He was introduced to us as Maung Phayon Kyaw, and Daw Silavati told us he is incredibly bright, always passing his tests with marks well over 90%. He, too, would have been a 'throw-away' were it not for this school and wonderful refuge—he has no family so calls his teacher "Mother". As we talked, Maung Phayon Kyaw tenderly helped Kaun Kaun outside—and the brotherly kindness was palpable. Outside, as Daw Silavati showed us around the large compound, the late afternoon routine was in full swing. We marveled at the size of the place and asked Daw Silavati how she managed to get the donations to support so much. She told us quite matter-of-factly (and in typical Burmese fashion) that she respects the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha—and just trusts. She never seeks out donations, but somehow enough always comes—she



said because of her previous good deeds. Before we left we took a photo with her and some of the 40 teachers in front of a classroom building that was being renovated, living examples of faith and positive attitude (See below).

Over at *Sanmyathita Nunnery and School*, examinations had already finished so the nuns and many students

could relax a little. The school has grown significantly, and now there are 588 students during the school year including 160 residents (130 of whom are nuns). By the time we arrived it was evening and some of the young nuns were dressed in their work robes, playing or reading or doing chores. Amongst them was Ma Kulavati, whom I recognized as the orphan who had arrived the



Ma Kulavati (above) and Daw Khemayee with the new foundling (above right).

day we visited last year (see “Like Water for a Thirsty Person,” July 2013). She posed for photos a bit shyly with her arms crossed in the way all Burmese children



are taught to do as a mark of respect. Daw Khemayee told us that at first things had been ‘rough’ since the discipline of the nunnery was unfamiliar, but that now she is happy here. The nuns had recently adopted another foundling: a 3 year-old boy who had been sold by his mother after his father had died—an uncle had rescued him and his brothers and brought them to the monastery. Acts of desperation like this are shockingly common and attest to the terrible conditions women and children face in the changing economy of modern Burma. The young nuns here—some of whom are also orphans—are the lucky ones, guaranteed a caring home and a good education. And the education is not only reading, writing, and arithmetic: during the Water

Festival she told us she would be offering a 7 day meditation retreat for 150 yogis, some of whom would be the resident nuns. Obviously ‘relaxation’ was a fleeting state at Sanmythita School!

By now it was almost dark and a lengthy visit to *Kyaikalo School* had to wait for another day. Carol and I had already called in a month or so earlier to offer your dana and found that our friend Daw Yuzana was in the midst of a ‘rough patch,’ on account of a conflict about the control of the land on which her nunnery and school are built. She was holding her ground and still getting support for the school, but this was making a big job even more challenging. But even though she had been dealing with some really big difficulties, they had neither defeated her nor weakened her desire to help others and to purify her own mind—if anything, she was even more determined. She told us, “It reminds me to meditate. As long as I have Dhamma, I can take care of my mind!” That kind of dedication also applies to how she manages the day in day out task of keeping the school going. It had cost her quite a lot this last year, as there isn’t always enough coming in to cover the expenses,



The scene outside as all (130!) of the young Kyaikalo nuns do their regular evening puja

like the 2 bags of rice per day (at 18 USD per bag), the salaries for the 25 teachers (about 1200 US Dollars per month), the hundreds of other small expenses—all of which add up to a big headache.



Daw Yuzana and all the nuns persevere in the face of the many challenges and headaches of running their schools!

Funding the teachers

We were sobered by the fact that the monumental jobs that these nuns has taken on had this year gotten even more challenging for all of them. One by one each of the head nuns had told us that the support they had been receiving for teacher's salaries from a corporate donor (Shine Hope, the traditional pharmaceutical company) had dried up.

For all of these schools, teachers are the most important and biggest ongoing expense, and now the nuns were on their own in finding these very significant amounts of money each and every month. In some cases, the government was partly supporting the teacher salaries, and sometimes the nuns would have to pay out of their own personal alms. Often the nuns immediately allocated our offerings for salaries as soon as they received them. Bricks and mortar are not nearly as essential to schools as teachers are!

Offerings of Hope

Even though Metta In Action can't pay all the salaries of all the teachers of all the schools we support with your donations, thanks to your generosity we are still able to make substantial donations—donations that provide safe and secure places for thousands of youngsters to learn. Girls and boys, novices and nuns. And if there is one thing that people in Burma are deeply hungry for, it is modern education—no-one here takes education for granted. Everybody knows that education lasts a lifetime, and that it can reach forward in unimaginable ways to touch lives in the future. And everybody knows that education is power. So the gratitude we witness when we offer your dana to the schools is always heartfelt and deeply touching. Everyone (from the smallest children to the teachers, monks and nuns) says, “*Thank you* for offering us a future.”



With much metta and gratitude for your support! ~Virañani