

Metta In Action Update (2)
June, 2015

Taking Care of All Beings

(Support for Nuns)



Your generous donations to Metta In Action have made a substantial difference to the lives of the nuns we are able to support. And as the years have gone on, the cumulative effects of your dana have become increasingly obvious: whereas once many of the nuns lived crowded together in small bamboo huts, now sturdy buildings are taking shape; instead of open surface wells, most nunneries have a deep well for clean drinking water; and of course there are the new toilets, many of them. These improvements are not just a matter of convenience and comfort. They make a very tangible difference to the health and quality of lives for all the nuns.

In previous years' updates, we have described how important nunneries are in Burma, and how they offer de facto orphanages and vital social services for the entire community. And as the country continues to open more and starts to catch up to the rest of the world, the role the nuns play is becoming more important, not less so. While Yangon's skyline is becoming transformed by gleaming luxury condos that are going up all over the place, very few local people are actually in a position to participate in the economic boom. Instead, they feel its effects negatively—as the rate of inflation continues to skyrocket, and the gap between rich and poor only continues to widen. Rents in parts of Yangon rival those in London or New York, and food prices continue to climb.

As a result, many Burmese people are being left behind, struggling to adjust in an economy that is bent on innovation and new technology, maximizing profit, and foreign investment rather than being tuned to old ways and the local market.

The country as a whole is scrambling to modernize all at once, everywhere—and visible and lucrative projects such as airports take precedence over invisible human ones. So there is still little or no improvement in infrastructure or government services where they are sorely needed—education, health care, and providing care for vulnerable families, youth, and elders.

On top of this, the increased openness of the country has brought not only good things, but also the worst that humanity has to offer—trafficking and the sex trade. Economic vulnerability and poverty create ample opportunity for these to thrive, and they are doing all too well. Last year we had begun to hear about the sex trade, and this year, sadly, there were more stories, attesting to the increased dangers faced by poor girls and young women: dangers of being lured to China for jobs but then being sold as wives, or ending up in the brothels either abroad or now even in Yangon.



Global economics—more than a few steps up from learning the new cell phone technology!

So nunneries are vital places of safety for girls and young women, providing refuges, education, health care...and love in abundance. The nuns care for everyone, and respond to need wherever they find it. And they do an amazing job. So we are very happy to support their efforts as we can and where we can. What we can offer sometimes feels like ‘a drop in the bucket,’ but drop by drop the bucket fills—and where we *can* help, it’s so heartening to see the beneficial results of several years of continuous effort.



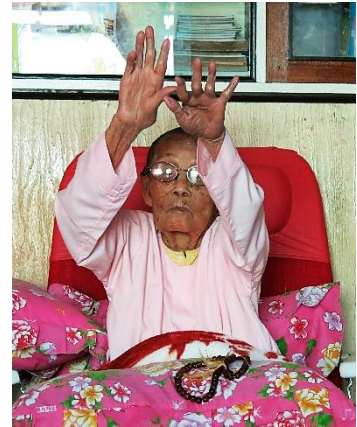
Some of the many beneficiaries of your donations!

This year, thanks to your generosity, we offered support to 35 nunneries (over 350 nuns in nunneries ranging in size from 1 to 62 women and girls). You have directly made a difference for all these women, in big and small ways. What follows are some stories that give you a flavor of life in the nunneries—of the human challenges and joys these nuns face on a daily basis—and how your donations have created hope and happiness for many beings.

Home Away From Home

In December 2014, as we were beginning to distribute your offerings for 2014-2015, Carol, Greg, and I had the singular good fortune to be able to visit and pay respects to Daw

Rupavati, a nun who is the Auntie of an acquaintance of ours from Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre named U Maung Maung Shwe. Daw Rupa has lived as a nun in the beautiful Sagaing Hills in Upper Myanmar for most of her very long life—since 1920, when she was seven years old! Now she is 102 years old, and quite healthy for her age, although she's no longer able to see or hear very well. But the diminished senses do not stop her from happily radiating *mettā* to all beings, which she does much of the day, sitting in her chair in the reception hall of the monastery.



Daw Rupavati energetically radiating goodwill to everyone.

I later found out from U Maung Maung Shwe that when he was quite small, he had actually lived for a number of years there with her in the nunnery. It was so interesting for us to learn what the experience of someone who had lived in a nunnery as a child is like, as we often meet children in this situation and have always wondered what life is like for them. Are they lonely? Homesick? Happy? If we ask, the little ones always *say* they are happy, and mostly they look to be so—but of course it's hard for us to really know, from the outside.

Contrary to my expectations, U Maung Maung Shwe told us that for him there was no sense at all of strangeness or homesickness about being in the nunnery—he simply said quite strongly and simply that it was ‘very very good;’ and clearly the memories of his time there are still very sweet, many years later.

But not everyone is so fortunate as to have nuns in the family who can care for them, and in some cases there does seem to be a period of adjustment for the littlest ones—especially those who have lost parents and/or are very far away from home. Thousands of children in Burma go to nunneries because they've been orphaned, because their homes are in conflict zones, or simply because their parents live far away from schools and are too poor to provide them with sustenance and an education. While eventually new kids *do* settle in to their now homes (and thrive in the big loving families that nunneries are) they can appear to us to be solemn or perhaps just shy and very quiet—which is hardly surprising under the circumstances.



New nuns at Seinyaungkyi Nunnery—helping each other with chores and with the adjustment to monastic family life.

At a medium-sized or large nunnery it's a little easier for new kids to adjust, as there may be others who have come from the same village or general area. At the Seinyaungkyi Nunnery, we noticed several new young nuns, and were told that they had recently come from the Shan State in Upper Myanmar. Many of them had been orphaned and none speak much if any Burmese; the youngest is 8. They all go to the nearby Zaloon Parahita School, merely reciting the lessons along with all the



We may not be related, but we are definitely sisters!

others but with no understanding. But once they get back to the nunnery, there is an older teen-aged nun who can translate for them and help with their lessons. When we were there, the young nuns had just come home from school and were going about their usual chores, sweeping and tidying, working together as a team. Language was obviously no barrier with these kids, and they seemed to enjoy both the work and each other's company.

Girls come to nunneries for various reasons but always benefit from the family that they get there. At the Paññayaungkyi Nunnery, we met a five year old nun whose story is far from uncommon. Her grandparents had been caring for her, but after the grandfather had

a stroke her grandmother could no longer cope. So she offered the little girl to the nuns when they came by on their almsround! No-one knows the little girl's exact age; at that time she was less than a year old; but now everyone loves her as though she were a daughter or a sister. And thanks to this refuge, she is happy and healthy, and going to school with all her surrogate sisters.

In smaller nunneries, the adjustment can be more 'bumpy,' as there fewer kids for company and not so many helping hands. At Sukhagari Nunnery near the Shwe Oo Min Meditation Centre, Carol and I witnessed the challenge this can pose both for the new girls and the nuns who receive them. When we arrived one day in early December, we surprised a tiny nun who had been playing in the front yard. She took one look at these strange foreigners and started to cry. The nuns immediately picked her up and held her, but she was inconsolable. By the time the nuns had received the donation and were chanting the blessing (quite a while later), the little one was in full meltdown mode. Her wailing was met with a touching amount of *mettā* and calm from the nuns, who gave us their blessing while comforting the child at the same time. While the blessing was intended mostly for the donors, we also deeply felt it to be for this little girl as well.



Ma Mingalacari and Daw Parami

Daw Parami (the head nun) explained to us that the little girl (Ma Mingalacari) was only 2 years old, and had come to be raised at the nunnery only recently. She was adjusting, but was far from home—and had become extremely attached to the eldest nun. So when Daw Parami disappears for a significant length of time (say, to go to the market), this response sometimes results. The nuns were unfazed by the commotion—they had been there before with her and with other children so knew very well that in the long run everything would be OK. Here (and at all the nunneries) they cheerfully face



Ma Medhavi gets a helping hand

this kind of challenge day in and day out, taking in kids who may be traumatized and so not easy to console or to raise—and sometimes in large numbers.

Taking Care of Each Other: Sukharama and Sasanaramsi Nunnery

The nuns always seem to manage, usually by delegating authority to some of the older teenagers, who can help care for and keep an eye on the younger ones. At Sukharama Nunnery we noticed two small new nuns (Ma Medhavi and Ma Kesuvati) who had recently arrived from the Irrawaddy Division. They had been orphaned and this was now their family. As all the nuns gathered to



Beautifully done!

chant for us after the offering, it was clear that the new ones were getting a lot of kind attention and instruction from the others sitting around them, who were often showing them how to sit or adjusting their robes for them.

We saw another kind of communal care at the Sasanaramsi Nunnery (next to Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre) one morning when we arrived just after breakfast. We had showed up just as all the teenaged nuns were queuing up to walk to Zaloon Parahita School for their examinations, and the eldest of them was organizing everyone before they headed out in single file. The next



Sasanaramsi nuns headed home at the end of the school day.

day as we were passing by the nearby Appamada School at the end of the day, we saw the same thing in reverse—this time with the smaller kids. It was obviously not an easy job—many of the kids were full of energy and squirming to get moving, but three of the oldest of them (all teenagers) somehow kept order and discipline; while two stayed back and organized the kids in the queue, another had to run back and forth from the lane to the school a couple of times, rounding up the laggards and rascals, making sure (by counting heads) that every one of the nuns

was present before they set off. We were struck again by the challenge everyone faces to create and maintain order and safety in what could easily be a chaotic situation.

Safe Spaces

Safety is often on the minds of nuns when they care for the little ones, especially now that (as we shared last year), their neighborhoods are becoming increasingly busy and crowded. So we were happy to see that some of the walls that we had donated last year were finished and creating spaces of safety and privacy for several nunneries. This year it was Sasanaramsi Nunnery's turn. These

nuns have done an amazing job of raising dozens of orphans after Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and since—in seven years, the nunnery has grown from about 15 nuns to 62. Like many other nunneries, they live close to a road that is getting dangerously busy, so they needed a safe boundary wall at the front of the property to help protect a quiet atmosphere in the nunnery and to keep the many little ones from wandering onto the nearby street. Unfortunately, last year they lost a major donor (she had become seriously ill) just after beginning a big building project, so the wall had been shelved for the time being. When we offered to help, they were able to move ahead quickly: only a few weeks after we donated the funds, the wall was well underway, and even in an unfinished state it was creating a tangible feeling of protection.



The wall construction underway at Sasanaramsi

Down the road at Chanmay Thayar Nunnery, the front wall they built last year is finished, and Daw Rupa told us that now she needed to extend it along the side of the property. There is a low fence there, but not enough to deter ‘bad people’ from jumping over



The Mya Thita Oo clean-up crew hard at work

it in the evening when they are drunk, yelling and generally creating a disturbance. While the rest of the neighbors really look out for the 27 nuns who live here—and the ‘bad behavior’ was only a nuisance and not at all a matter of physical violence or theft—it was still essential that it stop! So we happily offered what was needed for that, as well as to finish a new dormitory for some of the older nuns that they had started last year.

Growing Spaces

Mostly the nuns are tend to make progress little by little on with the long-term building projects that they have started. But sometimes we marvel at what they can manage to do in a just a few weeks; when donations come in they can make leaping progress on projects that had been temporarily put on hold. At Mya Thita Oo Nunnery, we have seen this happen several times. This

last year, they built a new and beautifully designed kitchen and wash house from our 2013-14 offering; the latter is especially important when you have a growing population of teenagers! With our donation this year they got right to work and built an upstairs room above the kitchen so that there would be more sleeping space. It was a complicated project (involving a roof extension and partial demolition of internal walls), but they managed to do the work very quickly—in part because everyone was helping, even the smallest ones. The windows and the ceiling will be finished at some later date as more donations become available; for now, the space is good enough to move into.



So the new sleeping space is already useable.



Raising the roof at Kyesinaye

And sometimes old structures need to be radically changed to adjust to new circumstances. In Nwe Kwe village, some of the nunneries have had to make substantial renovations. Two years ago a factory and massive wall had been built along one side of the area. This had disrupted normal drainage patterns and now the neighborhood can be flooded a number of times each rainy season—last year was especially bad.

When floods come, several inches of water and mud can cover the ground floor, sometimes for days on end. The nuns have to bring everything upstairs, and then it takes ages to clean everything when the water finally recedes. So at Kyesinaye Nunnery, they used our donation from last year to start a second floor on an extension they had made the year before, with an upstairs toilet and bathing area. We were happy to make another offering, so they can finish the addition and have a healthier and more comfortable rainy season!

At the outset of any large building project, nuns know very well that with their limited amount of support, these may take many years to complete. Chanmyavati and Sasanasukhacari Laputta Nunneries have each taken over 5 years to even come close to finishing their big projects. At Sayanagoneyee Nunnery, the new building is just beginning to take shape—and the nuns assume it will be a very long process. Daw Malasiri (the abbess) has nuns who are ready to come live there but she knows there isn't enough room yet. But when the building is ready, the children will come. She showed us the very nicely drawn up plans for the compound, saying quite wisely that she doesn't want to hurry—it will be fine even if it takes years to finish. Nonetheless, from one month to the next, we noticed that they had made huge progress, with the ground floor well along.



The Sayanagoneyee nuns embark upon life in the construction zone



Seinyaungkyi's new gate, and buildings under construction

Sometimes when nuns begin to build more substantial structures, they may become more noticed and so attract local donors. Then projects can go much faster. This has recently happened for the Seinyaungkyi nuns, who have acquired the support of a local family who have made a fortune in the furniture business. When we first met these nuns, they were living in a tiny bamboo house. Now two years along, even though the road is still tiny and hard to find, the nunnery has a wall and new buildings are coming along relatively quickly. The wood and bamboo house is gone, and with your help and the support the local donors, they have a good boundary wall

and very Burmese entry gate; they have also mostly finished the bottom floor of what will be a two-story structure. And of course now they have the best possible furniture! The nuns are happy and glad of their success so far, and will work even harder to see their vision through. We are sure that as the building grows, so will their population. This year there are 21 nuns here; 12 new nuns came this year. Once it is finished there will be room for many more!

The Nunnery *Mettā* Atmosphere

Whatever their available space, the nuns take in and care for all beings as best as they can, with what seems to be to us to be a limitless supply of physical and *mettā* energy. The atmosphere in the nunneries is incredibly sweet. Everyone is bathing in a protected sea of kindness—and the kids very naturally learn to live this way themselves, picking up loving-kindness by osmosis. The senior nuns set the example and do the training, and the kids essentially have the support of a very large and caring family.



The *mettā* atmosphere at the nunneries is especially noticeable when you see how at ease animals are, even amongst dozens of rambunctious kids. This has always been obvious at the Sasanasukhacari Laputta Nunnery, where over the years a few enormous and very docile cats have been the darling of the young nuns. But this year we were amused and surprised by one new resident—an enormous white rabbit! Clearly a much loved pet, she lay totally relaxed and at ease in the arms of one of the nuns, nibbling on a stalk of greens. It's the same at other nunneries: at the Chanmyavati Nunnery, we noticed one of the smaller nuns holding a big but very happy cat; at the Saddhammaramsi Nunnery a pair of tiny kittens was playing in the corner as we made our offering; and at the Sasanayaungkyi Hinthada Nunnery, we watched as an enormous tomcat hung in the arms of a small nun, as relaxed and happy as can be. Adorable as all this is, the 'take home message' is much more about how the nunneries are havens of *mettā*.

And that the *mettā* is genuine and heartfelt goodwill (in spite of preferences!) was really obvious at the Chanmyay Myaing Nunnery. They had some new residents: two adult dogs and three puppies; Daw



Agga (the abbess there) told us that she does not like dogs *at all*, not one bit. But out of pure compassion she had allowed them to take refuge in the nunnery from a pack of vicious local dogs. She told us that she takes care of them because it is wholesome karma. The kids were obviously enjoying helping her with this, and at the same time were learning about the unlimited and unbiased quality of *mettā* from Daw Agga's example!



And as much *mettā* as there is for animals, of course the children are bathed in even more. Mostly girls come to nunneries, but it is not at all uncommon for boys to stay for a while as well—like U Maung Maung Shwe did. Sometimes they are family coming for Dhamma training, sometimes they are orphans off the street needing shelter. All are welcome, and all are equally cared for.

All the nuns offer their deep thanks to you, and so do we! It is a gift and a privilege to have the opportunity to be part of this beautiful flow of goodwill and kindness. We wish you could hear the chants of well-wishing that are invariably offered when we make your donations. And it is no exaggeration to say that the nuns offer their chants of *mettā* to you every day, because they often tell us that they do this. So in lieu of being there in person, here are some photos of the grateful recipients of your offerings, with their heartfelt well-wishes for you:

“May all the donors be well, happy, and peaceful,
And may all aspects of their lives be accomplished!”

