

Metta in Action Update
December 2014 (4)

Keeping Safe Havens Safe...and Growing!

(Support for Nuns)



Of all the things Metta In Action does, it is the support of the nuns that often touches us most deeply. And donations to nuns make up well over a third of our total offerings. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which being that nunneries are truly safe places for orphaned or poor girls. As we mentioned in a recent update (“Offering Bright Futures,” November 2014) there is now a more open acknowledgement of the problem of the sex trade—but young girls in nunneries are safe, loved, educated, and cared for. No small thing.

So we have been joyfully supporting 38 nunneries—a number of them continuously since 2008. While there is the temptation to make donations to more and more nunneries, we have decided for the time being to keep things more or less as they are; to foster the direct connections of friendship we already have rather than to offer the donations more widely. While from time to time we do decide to support a new nunnery that seems particularly deserving, it is not a decision we make frequently. We know the nuns to whom we make offerings—some for at least seven years, and a few for well over a decade—and it is this connection that gives us the ability to give with

confidence: we know that there is genuine need, and that the dana will be used wisely and well. As these connections take time to nurture we do not want to ‘spread ourselves too thin.’

With so many visits to these many nunneries, we can’t begin to describe all of them in a single update. But what follows are a few vignettes of our offerings, to give you the feeling of being there, of joining us in these wonderful offerings—as well as a sense of how these nuns live.



Seeing what’s new at the Sasana Sukhacari Laputta Nunnery

Protection and Safety

Near the end of each year (right now, in fact), as we prepare to make our offerings, we very much enjoy visiting each of the nunneries we support. It’s a wonderful chance to catch up with the nuns, and to learn about their current needs. And when we ask abbesses what they need, a theme often emerges—and sometimes we begin to say to each other in a lighthearted way ‘this year it’s toilets...,’ or ‘electricity...,’ or ‘water...,’ or whatever the pattern seems to be. Of course it’s never really as simple as that, but we *have* seen a definite trend over the years. As the nuns’ most pressing and basic needs are met, then other priorities become more important. And with the many changes that have pervaded Burmese communities in the last few years, new needs are emerging.

So it was in 2013-14. At first we were puzzled by what we began to hear from a number of the nuns—and from our western vantage point a bit taken aback. What they were telling us was that they needed boundary walls. We thought, “Walls?” and initially we weren’t as enthusiastic about offering such things as we had been about giving toilets or wells or electricity. But soon enough it became very clear why this had become such a pressing need. Burma is changing, and fast: the economy is booming and Yangon is growing in leaps and bounds. Just a few years ago many of the nunneries were surrounded by fields and little market gardens, but now these areas have become more built up, less secluded, and increasingly less safe.

Daw Rupa from Chanmyay Thayar Nunnery told us that since the small dirt path in front of the nunnery had been paved, it had become much busier and noisier--and the nuns did not feel as safe as they had before. We had repeatedly been dodging motorcycles on this same narrow road and knew very well how fast and reckless some of the drivers were. But what had not crossed our minds was that besides the obvious risk of collision, speedy motorcycles could be convenient getaway vehicles after a theft. And we began to hear similar stories elsewhere—and of thefts of



Now that the little fields have gone, walls begin to serve an important protective role.



Phys. Ed., Burma Style—hard physical labor is the gym for most of the country, not only for the nuns!

food, mobile phones, cash, and building supplies that happened when the nuns had gone out on their alms rounds. One of the most bizarre thefts was what happened at the Sasanayaungkyi Hinthada Nunnery: the nuns returned at the end of a long day of walking for alms to find that someone had run off with every one of their cooking pots. After we heard several stories like this, we were more than happy to offer the ease that comes with feeling safe and secure!

Our offerings this year contributed to protective walls or fences for six nunneries, and often it was the nuns themselves who did the hard physical labor of cleaning the bricks, then carrying them, the sand, and the concrete. We noticed that usually it was the teenagers doing the heavy work, laughing and chatting as they went—and Daw Sucari of Mya Thita Oo Nunnery told us that many of the energetic teens actually enjoy the chance to work outside. As we watched it did seem to be the case. No-one was in too much of a hurry (this is not the hyper-efficient West!), and yet the work was getting done, and happily.

Of course walls were only one small part of our offerings—building these safe havens and keeping them going is always a concern of the head nuns (of even a small nunnery), as alms are never guaranteed. So your dana has paid for countless other necessities for nunneries in all stages of development. In the initial years after a nunnery is established, first and foremost we offer the basics. Water, toilets, and a decent and durable building are the main concerns for a young nunnery.

Beginnings: Sayanagonyee Nunnery

In the early years, it can be a struggle for the nuns to find donations to build even very basic infrastructure. Like building a home anywhere, the essentials must be attended to all at once: water, toilets, and a safe and secure place to sleep. Nuns who have ‘their act together’ invariably start small, and start with the things that are most important for health: but these may be by necessity very simple indeed.

We supported only one ‘new’ nunnery this year, Sayanagonyee Nunnery, and their little place was pretty typical of a nunnery in these early stages of development. Previously the head nun and her mother (who is also ordained) had lived for some time in a big study nunnery near the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon.



The entrance to Sayanagonyee Nunnery



Daw Nandatheri in the compact kitchen of Sayanagonyee Nunnery

best for the two of them. Now grown up and well educated, with an Agyidan degree (one step below the Dhammacariya), Daw Malsiri has a vision of taking in youngsters and bringing them up as nun, just as she had been. But not just yet, because their main building is still way too small—it is just a simple two-room bamboo hut.

They had moved in only 8 months before our visit, but we were impressed by how organized the nunnery was. Daw Nandatheri told us that she works outside quite a bit and had planted a number of trees, and her work was obvious—the nunnery was lovingly tended.

And around the nunnery was a chain-link fence; it would have to do for now, even though security was definitely a concern—they had also had thefts. But whenever the nuns have a little surplus, it has to go into basic infrastructure. Our dana would be used to build decent brick and concrete toilets—a universal need of nunneries in the early stages of their development, and obviously a big priority. When we commented to Daw Nandatheri how neat and tidy the compound was, she remarked that the *toilets* were not neat and tidy and could really use some improvement! It was true—they were the very basic bamboo kind, which are rickety and not very good for these five women.

Then before striking out on their own, they stayed at the Sasanaramsi Nunnery for about a year. And now they have their own new little place, full of hopes and potential for the future.

The abbess, Daw Malasiri, lives here with four other nuns including her mother, Daw Nandatheri. Nandatheri was originally from Dawei, quite a way south of Yangon, and had ordained 31 years ago with her daughter (who at the time was only three years old)—because she was a 27 year-old widow in poor health and she wanted the



Old (centre) and new toilets at Chanmyavati Nunnery: our donations make a huge difference in health and comfort!

Gaining a Firm Footing: Saddhammaramsi and Dhammarama Nunneries

Once a nunnery is established, the task of building the basics becomes less of an immediate burden and the nuns can consolidate what they have achieved and perhaps even think about expanding. But even if things may seem to be going smoothly, the lives of these women rest on a knife's edge: one disaster can jeopardize the entire endeavor. One nunnery we supported in 2012-13 was



Now 24 young nuns have a much more healthy and comfortable place to stay!

Saddhammaramsi Nunnery, which was in the midst of such a situation; it had been painful to witness what these nuns had to endure (see “Together We Can Do Anything,” July 2013). They had been cheated, and were about to be evicted from land they thought they had bought—losing everything they’d worked so hard to achieve. We had been directed to the nunnery by Daw Sumanacari at Appamada School, and were very happy to be able to help at this critical juncture—by offering funds so that they could begin to rebuild elsewhere.

So it was a joy this year to go back and see how they had more than managed to get back on their feet—the place seemed to be thriving. The sisters in charge, Daw Ayecari and Daw Tejavati, have produced a small miracle. They now own the new land they had found last year, and we noticed a list of the donors hanging on the wall; they have been able to find quite a bit of

support. Daw Ayecari told us she wants to buy the adjoining piece of land so she can take in more girls.

In the middle of the property is the tidy and well-built bamboo and wood structure that is home to 30 girls now, three of which are orphans, the youngest of whom is about five. All the girls go to either Appamada or Zaloon Parahita Schools, and we noticed quite a number of certificates hanging on the wall to commemorate their achievements. It was a completely different scene from last year!

Of course it is not all smooth sailing: when we asked if everything was OK, Daw Ayecari told us that they had been unable to get electricity—so all their power comes from a diesel generator. Sure enough, as we went inside we saw it sitting just inside the front door. A man was sitting there fixing it and periodically started the contraption, blowing smoke and fumes our way. We were concerned for the health of the nuns, but they seemed unfazed—though they did tell us they very much hoped to get their own electric line soon.

Over at Dhammarama Nunnery, there had also been trouble—in this case the abbess (Daw Issariyañani) had been forced to take out a loan from a friend because her mother had gotten very ill. So she got the loan to pay for the treatment, using the vacant half of



Now there's plenty of room, but electricity is a noisy and persistent headache!



The new well in process at Dhammarama Nunnery

the nunnery land as collateral. In the end, her mother died anyway, and the ‘friend’ jacked up the cost of returning the land to first one and a half times the amount of the loan, and then a bit later twice that—much more than the nuns could afford! So half their land is gone. She told us that because of skyrocketing land prices, it was going to be sold on speculation, simply to make more money.

For most people this would be a significant blow, but the nuns seemed to be taking it in stride—and we offered a new well to replace the

one on the part of the land that they had lost. Of course they were extremely relieved and happy to receive our donation, and arranged to get the well built within a week of receiving it! These nuns have struck us from the beginning as being both ‘serious’ and very ‘together’—they are both capable and resilient in the face of the ups and downs of life!

We were delighted to see how the solar system that we had put in the year before was making a big difference to their lives; they are delighted with it, and told us that it makes life much easier and now they can study in the evenings!

The Challenges of Expansion: Sasanaramsi Nunnery

Often the very basic facilities that a nunnery starts with need to be upgraded as it expands—perhaps multiple times. And if a project has begun and a main donor is for some reason unable to proceed, this can be a real struggle.

We have long delighted in living next to the Sasanaramsi Nunnery—to hear the little nuns repeating the Dhamma chants they are learning at the top of their lungs, and to see them as they walk to school. This year it turned out that they were in just such a fix. As the population has expanded, of course, so has the need for room. So when we visited in December 2013, there was lots of work in progress—a new boundary wall was going up on one side of the compound, and the main house was being upgraded. The



Sasanaramsi nuns ready to go to school on examination day

week before I had seen a new temporary hostel going up near the CMMC wall, and we discovered that the big bamboo hostel had been torn down to make way for a big new one. But there was now a big problem—the nuns had counted on a regular donation from an Indonesian supporter for the



The view through the back fence: a temporary hostel going up at the back of the Sasanaramsi Nunnery

construction of the new building, and they had just learned that she was no longer able to help because of deteriorating health.

Not all nunneries cope well with this kind of crisis, but the nuns at Sasanaramsi nunnery seemed to be fine, by downsizing their immediate plans and constructing temporary accommodation so that they can at least make a start on the new building.

The building process can take many years, especially now that building costs in Yangon have soared sky-high. Nuns will do what they can with the funds they have—and simply wait on the rest. In the Burmese way, they cheerfully live in temporary or partly finished buildings for a very long time—nunneries and monasteries can appear to be perpetual construction zones!

Light at the end of the Tunnel: Laputta Nunnery and Chanmyavati Nunnery

But buildings *are* eventually finished! Daw Uttama and Daw Uttara at the Laputta Nunnery, and Daw Paññasiri at Chanmyawati Nunnery have been slowly growing their new buildings for some time now, and each year they are nearer to completion; now it is down to the last details. And of course all the while, the partially finished buildings have been used to the fullest extent possible!

At Chanmyavati, as the new building nears completion, there are other things beginning to take priority. Our dana in 2012-13 had been enough to build three new toilets, and this year Daw Paññasiri told us she wanted to make a proper bathing area in the back that's protected and discreet—which is especially important for the many teen-aged nuns who live here. Now there are 17 girls at Chanmyavati: four 12-year-olds, and the rest are between 13 and 16 years old—and including two sets of twins! In addition to the regular school work (from Zaloon Parahita School) the girls study dhamma at home, and one nun got the best marks in the Mingaladon division in the government exams last year.



The twin sisters of Chanmyavati—four of many excellent reasons to have discrete and protected bathing facilities!

And established nunneries often need to expand as the population grows: at Chanmyay Thayar, for example, there are now 28 nuns as well as eight lay children from the abbess's native village. The lay kids are 'economic orphans:' because of financial hardship, their parents cannot care for



'Orphaned' by economic hard times...but now safe,

them properly anymore. So Daw Rupa took them in—and there was not enough space for everyone. So next to their main building, she has built a smaller hostel to accommodate the younger nuns and lay children.

The Ongoing Grind

Even if the main infrastructure is in place, the everyday concerns of having enough food, clothing or medical care can make running a nunnery quite stressful. Most nuns tell us that they get adequate food on their alms rounds—at least in the dry season. In the wet season, all the nunneries tell us that they have to make do with less, simply because it is not easy to go for alms. It can also be a challenge getting adequate nutrition. But the nuns have a way of working around this: the Laputta nunnery told us that if they have excess donations of rice, they will sometimes sell it back to one of the local shops so that they can buy vegetables and meat at the local market. And many of the nunneries have an edible garden—a few of which are extensive and beautiful.

With a population of growing young women, clothing is always an ongoing concern. Hand-me-downs are a partial solution to this challenge, and robes get passed along, going through various stages as they age: from 'best robes' all the way down to totally threadbare working robes. When new robes are needed, nuns are adept at sewing them: there is always an old-fashioned treadle sewing machine in the corner somewhere, and they can sew the robes and complicated inner blouses with remarkable ease and speed. Some nunneries even make a little extra income by sewing robes for other places. When we visited the Paññayaungkyi nuns in the village of Nwe Kwe there were huge rolls of fabric piled up in the corner, ready to be sewn into hundreds of nuns robes for the 'Buddhist Cultural Course' at the Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre—a summertime month-long training attended by about 350 girls and boys.



Lots of sewing to do is absolutely not a problem!

There were only a few weeks left to do all that sewing, but they seemed quite blasé about it; they do this every year and are used to the routine, knowing exactly how much time they need.

And with so many children in one place, medicine is always needed. In urgent cases, many of the nuns nearby come to the CMMC Metta Clinic on a Saturday or Sunday for dental or medical care. But there are all the usual chronic troubles such as colds, stomach trouble, and skin conditions.



Chanmyay Thayar nuns returning from a long day on the road, with the day's alms.



Nothing gets in the way of study!

One condition we have often seen is a fungal infection on the heads of some of the young nuns, especially at the poorer nunneries if conditions are crowded. Some years ago (in the Western way) we tried to ‘help’ by giving medicines, which the nuns graciously accepted—but nothing seemed to change. A little deeper investigation revealed that in order to effectively treat this condition and to prevent its spread, the nuns would have to sterilize bedding and dispose of all the infected pillows—and this would not be a one-time event. And since sleeping all together is a normal Burmese practice (people often share sleeping mats and bedding) everybody’s bedding would need to be treated. With so many kids, none of the nunneries could afford the expense of that! The nuns do their best to contain the infections, but it is a universal trouble that young nuns seem to outgrow.

And naturally, sometimes emergencies arise. At Sasanaramsi Nunnery, we met a very small 12 year old nun, Ma Dhammasiri, who about 3 months previously had been hit by a car and badly injured while walking for alms. She’d been in hospital for some time, with a broken arm and burns, and her mother also came and stayed to help out. Fortunately, the hospital was not too expensive, but the event had been quite a calamity for the nunnery as a whole and of course for the little girl. Understandably Ma Dhammasiri looked unhappy, but although she still could not move her arm normally, she said that at least it did not hurt anymore.

New Technology: Solar Power for the Sasanayaungkyi Hinthada Nunnery

Electricity is often at the top of the ‘wish list’ for nunneries but also near the bottom of the priority list—after food, shelter, and clothing. And for nunneries at the tail end of the line, there can be trouble getting power even if they *are* hooked up—because of widespread ‘pirating,’ there is not so much ‘juice’ to go around. So in these places, black-outs and brown-outs are an everyday occurrence and night-time power is never reliable.



Having light at night makes a huge difference not only for general convenience but particularly for the young nuns who need to study at night. So in the last two years, we have set aside dana to offer solar power to one nunnery each year—this year’s dana had been offered by Dhamma friends from Perth.



Two of the 65 Sasanaramsi nuns



Inside, the installing modern technology for an ancient way of life.

So this year's recipients were the Sasanayaungkyi Hinthada Nunnery. While they are not far away from power as the crow flies (being right behind the Shwe Oo Min Meditation Centre), the single electric line in this area comes down a long lane from another village and there is usually nothing left by the time it reaches them. So the eighteen resident nuns, many of whom are school kids, had to study with candles—in an old wood and bamboo building. But when we visited late one February afternoon, we noticed that the heat of the sun was palpable—this was a natural place for a solar system!

So one day we (Ariya and Virañani) came with a team of three solar technicians and they got to work, installing the batteries and wiring the lights. Where to put the panels was a puzzle. The main building was two stories and looked substantial, but Daw Vudañani told us there were problems with termites, so the technicians opted to install the solar panels at ground level. The guys worked around us as Ariya and I sat and enjoyed the hospitality of the nuns, and the system was finished astonishingly quickly, delighting everyone! The young and very hip techies were touchingly delighted to be helping the nuns, and the nuns were delighted that the nights of eyestrain were now a thing of the past! And of course we were also delighted to be the intermediaries of all this!



... While outside, we help make decisions and get to better know the nuns who will benefit from the light.



Ma Suddhammaramsi, then and now.

The Ultimate Beneficiaries

All of this work is for a single purpose—to create and support safe places for young women to grow and prosper in their lives and in the Dharma. As the years go on we begin to see confident young women emerge from childhood, and this can be very touching indeed. At May Thita Oo Nunnery, we were happy to see Ma Suddhammaramsi; now 13 years old, she has been a nun since she was three when her father had died. Sheltered and loved by the nuns, she has transformed from a cute toddler to a self-assured young woman—safe from any misfortune that may have otherwise have befallen her. She excels at her school work (at Zaloon Parahita School), and will have the tools to make a success of her life, whether she stays in robes or decides to return to lay life when she grows up. The support the nuns receive provides her with the safety and stability to make that choice.

Your dana has directly contributed to this beautiful safety net—for these 38 nunneries, and several hundreds of nuns, not including the nunnery schools that Metta In Action also supports. Together these nunneries and nunnery schools affect the lives of literally thousands of children, bringing safety, stability, and opportunity where these would otherwise be absent. And by keeping safe places safe, all the young nuns will have the chance to fully flower in their lives. Such a wonderful offering to give, and to receive!

As we begin to distribute your donations for this year, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your support and generosity. May the joy of having offered the gifts of health, education, shelter, and safety resonate through your hearts this holiday season!

With a deep bow of thanks and much mettā from all of us!
Virañani

