



'Peace comes from within.
Do not seek it without.'

-Buddha

Children of the Revolution

A Spiritual Journey
to Burma and Buddhism

By Feroze Dada



Children of the Revolution, by Feroze Dada, is a story which begins with a chance meeting at a family gathering in Burma (Myanmar) with a freedom fighter from the Pa'O region in the northeast of the country, and which then takes you on to a monastery on the shores of beautiful Inle Lake in Shan State. There, at the Buddhist monastery of Phaya Taung, the head monk Phongyi is passionately caring for and teaching more than 600 orphaned and refugee children of the revolutionary wars.

But at the same time, another story is unfolding, and that is the journey of self-discovery of Feroze Dada, who moves with his Burmese wife MuMu between his metropolitan western life and Taunggyi in the northeast of Burma, where her family live, and in doing so finds a new reality and purpose.

I first went to Burma in 2009, twenty years after the military rulers decided to change its name to Myanmar and only a few years after the first easing of travel and visa restrictions. I went there to meet my wife MuMu's family in the northeast Shan State. It was here on the shores of the remote and beautiful Inle lake that I encountered a group of people who were to change my life. As a Muslim living in London with a Burmese wife, I was soon to find an altogether different path.

It all began when I was taken aside at a family reunion in Taunggyi by MuMu's cousin Ahwin, one of the family elders, who is also a renowned Seer. He quietly said to me 'If you go to the lake it will change your life completely.'

Early next morning we set off from the jetty at Nyaung Shwe with our travelling companion who was introduced to me as Major. He had spent most of his life as a freedom fighter for the Pa'O cause. Shan State had been at war with the military government for over 60 years.

We had planned to explore the Lake further south but soon we ran into trouble. The wind was getting up, and soon we were in a violent storm with visibility down to only a few feet. The canoe starting rocking dangerously and we were forced to head to the shore for shelter. All we could see through the intermittent flashes of lightning was a large dark old building looming in front of us. As we got closer we saw that it was full of children peering curiously out of the windows, watching to see who these strangers were.

Major beckoned us to keep walking up the hill for a few minutes, despite the torrential rain, until we reached

another smaller building. Standing at the entrance dressed in old saffron robes was an unusually tall Theravada monk who welcomed Major warmly. This was Phongyi, the Head monk of the Phaya Taung monastery, and he was eager to find out all about us. We talked for an hour or so and he told us that this village had been directly in the middle of fierce fighting with the government Military, involving both the Pa'O guerrillas and the BCP (communists) It was during this time that he and Major had got to know each other well. While the Pa'O guerilla fighters had done everything they could to help, the government had cut off all aid to the area and even now they lacked basic amenities.

One afternoon Phongyi asked us if he could show us around the monastery grounds and take us to a local village. During the tour we were politely probed for ideas of how to make the monastery more self-sufficient. Phongyi explained that more and more children were arriving every day from the abandoned villages, and somehow they had to feed them and educate them. These were children of the revolution.

We debated several proposals and the clear front-runner was setting up a water bottling plant using the fresh mountain spring water from behind the monastery. Not only would this provide great health benefits for the community by reducing illnesses from water-borne diseases; it also had real significance for the monastery - water symbolises purity, clarity and calmness, and reminds us to cleanse our minds and attain the state of shamatha or calm abiding.

Commercially, too, there were big advantages in that if we could resource it properly, it would be scaleable. The monastery would be able to sell the mineral water and generate income to feed the children and provide for more facilities.

Phongyi's widespread reputation as a wise and compassionate spiritual leader, and indeed the whole focus on the 'pure' image of the monastery Phaya Taung, was the key to any enterprise. The community revered him, and so anything he endorsed was likely to work as long as a consistently high standard was maintained.

The practicalities of realising this dream were extremely difficult as Phaya Taung is in the middle of nowhere and there was no electricity on the site. As well as this, the planning permission and licensing regulations in Myanmar are both highly complex and arbitrary.

Heavy machinery from Yangon had to be transported up by road and canoe. It took almost two years of planning and several trips to London to raise necessary funds, and then back to Phaya Taung to supervise all the work.

Despite these obstacles I can clearly recall the time when at last the final touches were being made to the water factory and pumping system and we were waiting anxiously.

All of a sudden, the project manager came running towards us shouting and waving. We ran over and I could see that the work team had performed a miracle - all the filters had been installed, the air conditioning was up and running, and the bacterial tests had been done. As we arrived, the engineer turned on the switch and the purified water came gushing out of the filters and poured all over the floor - we had forgotten to put the bottles in place! But it hardly mattered. We were far too excited. It was magical - one of the most joyous moments of my life. I gazed on the faces of the children. Their smiles said it all.

In my own life I had been thinking a lot about what Phongyi had been teaching me and I had already decided to to deepen my practice with a Vipassana retreat. For some years now I have been friends with a spiritual master who had first introduced me to meditation, and he had taught me the principles of Zikr. Just before MuMu and I set out on our very first trip to Taunggyi, my friend had said to me 'you cannot know the truth by reading, studying, lecturing, thinking - close those doors. Only then in stillness the doorway of the heart will begin to open up'. I do remember feeling a sense of liberation.

The miracle of landing in a rainstorm at Phaya Taung, and the way it changed my outlook, enabled me to begin to practice what I had been taught but never experienced.

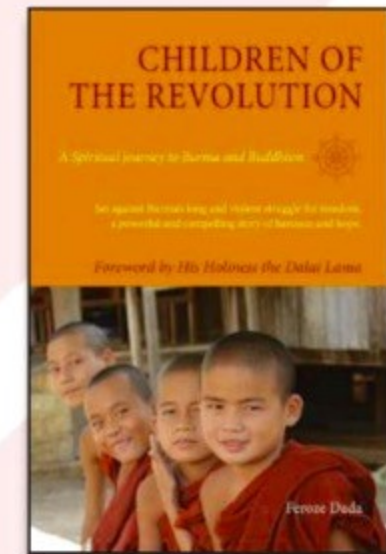
Seven years after I had first arrived at the monastery for shelter so many projects have been completed. One evening Phongyi, Major and I sat down to discuss the events of the day, and Phongyi said to me 'The practical needs of the (now) 1200 children are now complete, Feroze. They have clean water to drink, there is money from the sale of Ko Yin mineral water to buy food. They have good education, a fine computer training facility, and now together we have installed a medical clinic and sanitation facilities.' His words were carefully chosen, and I could sense that he was telling me the time for building was passing. It was now time for the spirit.

I have come to understand that there is no beginning and no end if you follow the Dhamma. There are no accidents, the law of karma tells us, but we're not the sole cause of our experiences either.

I realise that every single one of my experiences at the monastery was made up of both giving and receiving, finding and letting go, dreaming and being.

The prophecy that Ahwin made when I first came to Taunggyi only a few years ago echoes in my ears 'If you go to the lake your life will change forever.'

And so it has.



Feroze was born in Karachi. He has lived and worked for most of his life in London and is married to MuMu (Farida) Maung Dada. Having qualified as a Chartered Accountant and Chartered Tax advisor he was Managing Partner of his private client tax practice in London Mayfair for 25 years. Feroze is also a guest interviewer with TVapex, a community TV channel where he has interviewed everyone from a Buddhist monk to the legendary Andrea Bocelli on the subject of humanity.

