



Children of the REVOLUTION

*Author Feroze Dada tells of his Spiritual Journey
to Burma and Buddhism*

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

BUDDHA

In 2009, on the shores of the remote and beautiful Inle lake in Myanmar (twenty years after the military rulers decided to change the country's name from Burma and only a few years after the first easing of travel and visa restrictions) I first met my wife MuMu's family in the northeast Shan State. It was here 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.'

And so it happened. On a journey south, while travelling with a former freedom fighter for the Pa'O cause called Major, we found ourselves having to

shelter from a violent storm. 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. 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.

Later that day, the storm had passed and as we were about to bid farewell, Phongyi asked if there were any suggestions we would like to make to improve the facilities for the children. There was no time for a considered

response, but then I looked across at the children. Yes, they were happy, but their dreams were yet to be realised. I knew I had to do something.

Helping the Children

A few months later we were back at Phaya Taung to set up a computer school and determined to help in any other way we could. One afternoon Phongyi asked us if he could show us around the monastery grounds and we were politely probed for ideas on how to make the monastery more self-sufficient. More and more children were arriving every day from the abandoned villages. Phaya Taung was caring for more than 450 children, many of them orphaned by the wars, providing them with shelter, food and education. 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.



With realisation of one's own potential and self-confidence in one's ability one can build a better world.'

HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA

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

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 many trips to London to raise necessary funds, and then back to Phaya Taung to supervise all the work.

Divine Intervention

A great deal of energy and faith was needed from everyone to make it happen. There was one crucial point when I felt we needed some divine intervention. Work was flagging and difficulties seemed insurmountable. In my usual naïve way I suggested asking the Dalai Lama for encouragement, but Phongyi said that he didn't feel it was his place to make His Holiness aware of the situation at this monastery.

I remembered reading some of His Holiness' own advice: 'With realisation of one's own potential and self-confidence in one's ability one can build a better world.' I sent a copy of the book I had written to raise awareness of the situation at the monastery to his office. It was a very long shot – I suppose I was hoping for some sort of message of support for the work we were struggling with at Phaya Taung.

I was totally taken by surprise; only a very short time later I received a message from the Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to say that the Secretary had decided to present our request to His Holiness and 'an endorsement/blessing for the book and the work at Phaya Taung by His Holiness will be sent as soon as it is ready.' It was more than a miracle and at just the time when we needed it most.

We left again for the monastery shortly after receiving this news and decided to stay there for however long it took, until the water-bottling plant was in production. When we arrived at Phaya Taung we found that the work on all the engineering activity and the building itself really had stalled. Somehow we had to rebuild motivation and restore momentum, and so I called everyone around and read out the hugely encouraging message from His Holiness. I truly believe it was this that transformed our team who then proceeded to work day and night with extraordinary dedication to get the plant up and running. We were all determined to make His Holiness proud of his trust in us, and in the work we were doing.

Prophecy Comes True

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.

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. **KS**

- **Children of the Revolution by Feroze Dada, (£12.99, Watkins Publishing).**
- **inletrust.org.uk**