

# CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUTION: A Spiritual Journey to Burma and Buddhism *by Feroze Dada*

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.

Like most journeys, I found myself setting off for one destination only to arrive at another. Each fresh encounter brought profound changes to me in the way I look at the world. As a Muslim living in London with a Burmese wife, I was soon to find myself on 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. At the jetty at Nyaung Shwe, as we were climbing into the motorized canoes, I met our travelling companion, who has since become the closest of friends. He was introduced to me later as Major and, as we talked, I learned that he'd 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. He was lucky to be alive. He'd been shot. He'd seen terrible things. But ever since the peace process had begun in 2011 his life had changed, and I became curious to know more.

MuMu was well aware of who and what he was. This was a man who was well-known in this part of Burma but I had no idea about his background or the influence he once had and was soon to have on me.

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AHWIN  
A FAMILY ELDER

”

*Below: Feroze with  
head monk Phongyi*



Early the next morning we set off from Nampan to explore the lake further south, but soon we found ourselves driven ashore 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, and invited us to come in and sit down. In no time some novice monks produced hot green tea and some tofu kyaw. After being soaked through by the storm this was the most wonderful welcome.

Phongyi is 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 between the government Military and the Pa'O guerrilla fighters. It was during this time that he and Major had got to know each other well. While the Pa'O had done everything they could to help, the government had cut off all aid to the area and even now they lacked basic amenities.

As he talked with MuMu in Burmese, I watched our host closely. I could sense there was something truly remarkable about him, an aura, a force of energy, a sense of quiet assurance. I felt I had never met anyone like this before – and so it turned out to be.

He explained that Phaya Taung was a monastery 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.

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.

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.

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.

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. 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. It was a part of me now.

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. 🍀

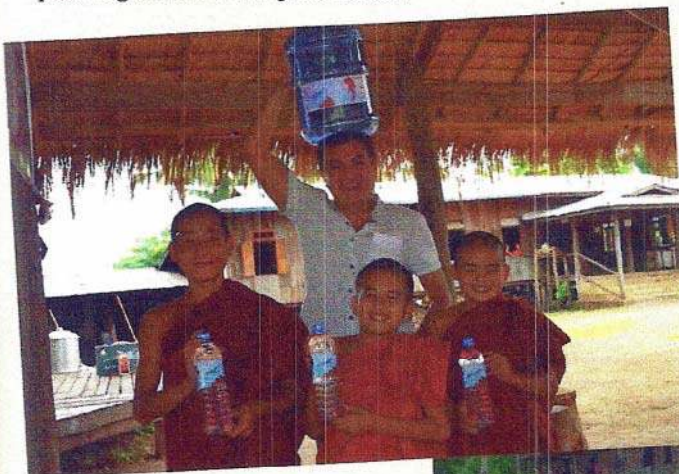


**MEET THE AUTHOR**

**FEROZE DADA** was born in Karachi and has lived and worked for most of his life in London. He set up the Inle Trust Charity to relieve poverty and provide education in Myanmar and has so far set up educational, healthcare and water facilities at the monastery.

**On the web**

[www.inletrust.org.uk](http://www.inletrust.org.uk)



Above:  
Ko Yin water factory opening with children



Right:  
Monastery children reception committee

Bookshelf  
**CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUTION: A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY TO BURMA AND BUDDHISM BY FERROZE DADA**, Foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, published by Filament Publishing, Illustrated Paperback (254 pages). All proceeds from the book go to the monastery school and orphanage at Inle, Phaya Taung.

