

'Sunshine after the storm'

ANOTHER
CHANCE
AT LIFE

On a trip to see his in-laws, **Feroze Dada** never imagined he'd return a changed man

Dark clouds hung heavy in the sky, hiding the sun, then the rain started to bombard us.

Next the thunderstorm erupted, lighting the heavens and violently rocking our boat.

It was November 2012 and my wife, Mumu, and I were on a trip around the beautiful Inle Lake, in Burma, as part of our holiday to see her relatives.

The boatmen weren't fazed by the monsoon, they'd seen it all before. But Mumu and I were well and truly shaken. We were fairweather tourists from London, and this river 'cruise' had now taken us way too far out of our comfort zone. I was scared the boat was going to sink.

'Please, can we head for land?' I asked our guide, a man known as Major.

The crew took a bit of persuading, but in the end, they turned us towards the shore.

By now the skies were black with the angry storm and all I could see through the intermittent flashes of lightning was a large, dark building by the lakeside.

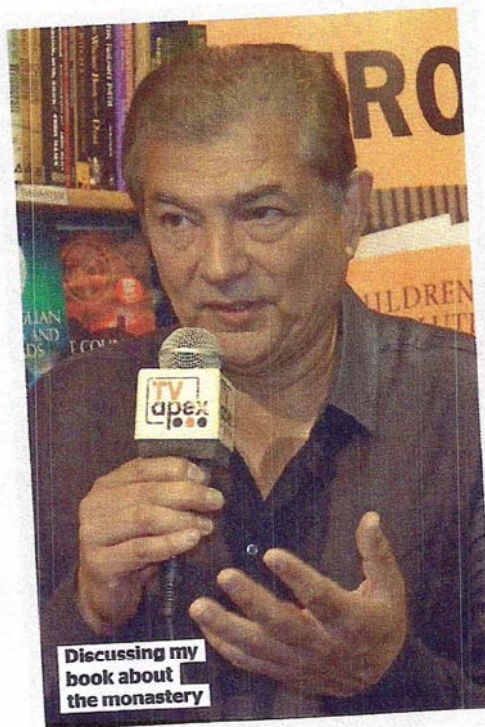
Door to another world

Soaked to the skin, but massively relieved to be off the rough water, Mumu and I clambered off the boat and followed Major towards the building.

In the darkness, I could just make out a few small faces peering out at us. With every illumination from the storm, I saw more children's faces. Some looking out from windows, others from the veranda of the building. There were so many of them, far too many to count.

What was this place?

Major beckoned us to keep up with him. Soaked to the skin, we battled the elements for a few minutes longer until we reached the



'A force of incredible energy that almost threw me'

building's entrance where a tall man with a shaved head, wearing saffron robes, stood.

The monk greeted Major like an old friend, welcoming us in for food, warmth and shelter.

He introduced himself as Phongi, and was clearly intrigued by Mumu and I and what we were doing there. This, he explained, was Phay Taung Buddhist monastery in a remote part of Burma – strangers, especially foreigners, didn't just rock up here!

I listened to the conversation, with Mumu and Major translating for me, and as I watched Phongi I felt something incredible.

There was an aura about him. A force of incredible energy that almost threw me back. I knew I'd met someone very special.

Back in London, I was a chartered accountant and tax adviser, with my own practice, dealing with the finances of many well-off people. This monk, sitting here in these Spartan, simple surroundings and emanating this amazing energy, was something new to me. It was as if he'd put his hand on my shoulder and was about to guide me on my spiritual path.

There was one question I was dying to ask though... *who were the children?*

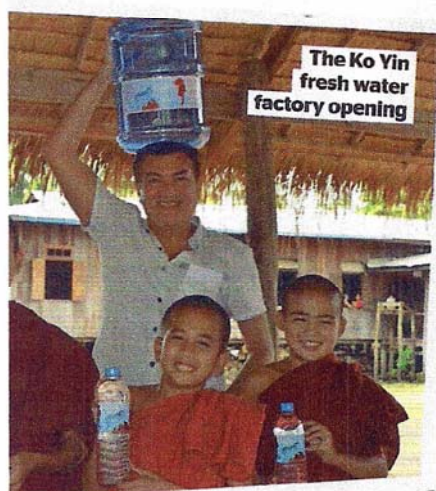
Safe sanctuary

Phongi's story was an astonishing one. Twenty years before, a couple had brought their son to the monastery and asked if he could be looked after.

The monk cared for and educated the little boy, who was to become the first of hundreds of orphans, some as young as three, whose parents had either died from disease, been killed in the country's many conflicts, or simply didn't have enough money to feed their children.

'We don't turn away a single one and there are 500 children with us right now,' Phongi told us.

It was nothing short of miraculous. Just



I thought about everything I had, about the luxuries I took for granted.

As Phongi watched me, my eyes glued to these children so content in their simple and peaceful lives, he asked me, 'What do you think?'

What did I think? I thought this was the most extraordinary place, with the most extraordinary energy – and I wanted to know its secret.

Phongi had taken on a Herculean task. I struggled to be a good father to two children. Here was someone managing to be a good father and teacher to a family of hundreds.

'I don't fully understand what is happening

here, would you let me track you from the moment you wake until the time you sleep,' I asked Phongi.

'Yes, but I start my meditation at 3.30am, outside at the pagoda,' he replied with a smile.

I didn't manage 3.30am, but come 4am I was sitting beside Phongi, on a little mat, shivering in the cold air.

I did know something about meditation, but it certainly wasn't ingrained in my everyday life. I didn't grasp then what I know now – that meditation isn't a ritual, it's a source of teaching.

Phongi and I meditated for a little while, two

Try it now!

Wise words to live your life by

You don't have to convert to introduce some of Buddhism's wisdom to your days

To understand true love you have to learn to perfect this love in yourself

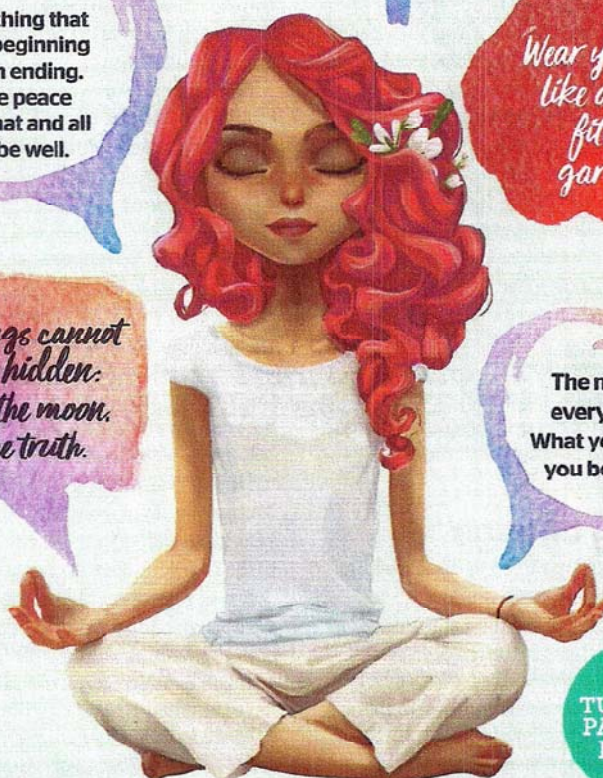
There are only two mistakes one can make along the road to the truth; not going all the way and not starting.

Everything that has a beginning has an ending. Make peace with that and all will be well.

Wear your ego like a loose fitting garment.

Three things cannot be long hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth.

The mind is everything. What you think, you become.



TURN THE PAGE FOR MORE...

three monks were effectively caring for all of those orphans.

'Would you like to meet them? The rain's stopped now, let me show you around,' Phongi offered.

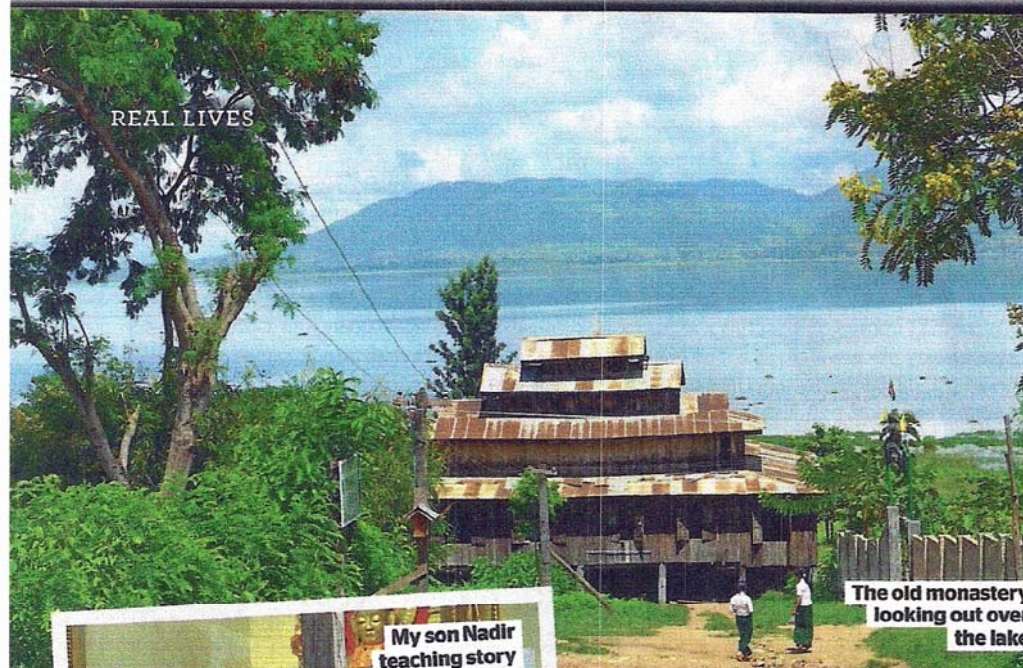
Meeting the children

He took us around the whole monastery, including the dormitories and classrooms. These buildings were where the children were not only fed, clothed and kept safe and warm. It was where they were taught a formal education, alongside Buddhist teachings.

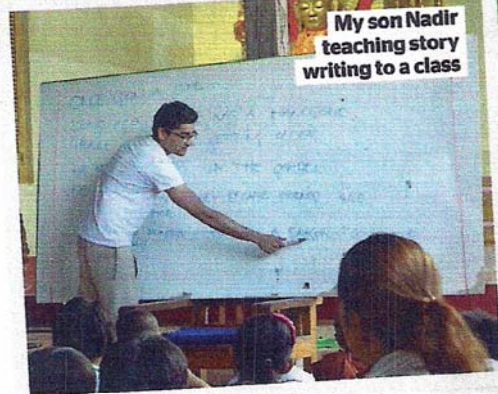
Seeing the children, so smart and well behaved and happy despite having – compared to us in the Western world – so little, really taxed my brain.

I thought about my own children, Sumaya and Nadir, now grown up and living their own lives. I loved them dearly, but all those times when I was working or indulging my own hobbies like my beloved cricket, when I could have been spending more time with them, showing them my love and attention.

They went to the best schools, wanted for nothing, lived in a lovely big house, and enjoyed family holidays. Now, looking at the orphans, it hit home that happiness was nothing to do with having money.



The old monastery looking out over the lake



My son Nadir teaching story writing to a class

old men sat holding hands, and I was soon aware of children joining us, quietly sitting down to meditate, while Phongi chanted with them. I realised that it wasn't his words that the children were responding to, it was the energy of the words, and the energy of the monk.

The 'magic' of this place was the spiritual energy. And I knew I was on my spiritual path.

When we came to say our goodbyes at the boat jetty, with the sun shining over the calm waters of the beautiful Lake Inle, Phongi asked us if we had any ideas about how we could improve the facilities for the children.

'I wish these children had computers,' I said, saying the thought as it popped into my head.

Phongi smiled and said, 'Computers? We don't even have electricity.'

On one level, it had been a ridiculous thing to say, and born out of my own privileged lifestyle, but Phongi's open question had triggered something in me.

Bringing change

My inner voice told me I had to do something. I knew I could and I knew I would.

Back in London, I was sitting at the desk in my office and the faces of the children swam into my mind.

My heart and soul were immersed in this mission. Something had awoken in me. The following spring, Mumu and I were back at the monastery, loaded up with laptops that

could be charged with solar power.

We were excited and nervous about our task ahead. We'd be working alongside each other, teaching these children how to use a piece of equipment they had never even seen.

We needn't have worried. The children were like sponges soaking up the information with enthusiasm. A number of those children, now young adults, are computer teachers.

Since that very first trip to the monastery, I have returned numerous times, often with Mumu, and sometimes with my children, too, and been privileged to have helped the Inle Trust come into being.

The charity raises the funding and gathers the expertise that is needed to carry on improving the lives of the 1,200 children who currently live there.

There is now a water purification plant, along with a health clinic, a nursing school, and a teacher training centre. The next project is a sewing school.

At the beginning, some of the many people I know through my work as a tax accountant thought I was having some sort of life crisis.

I wasn't at all. I had discovered my spiritual path, a path which we tend to neglect while chasing material pursuits. I have also found an inner peace through daily meditation. During the course of my many trips to the monastery, the wisdom of Phongi has helped me become a better and wiser man.

On my very first trip to Burma to meet Mumu's family, a relative of hers called Ahwin, who had a clairvoyant gift, said to me, 'If you go to the lake your life will change forever.'

It was a prophecy that turned out to be a blessing, in the form of another chance at doing something with my life. I have been given so much by the children of the monastery and have benefited beyond anything money can buy.

More info To buy Feroze Dada's book *Children of the Revolution* (£10.99, Filament Publishing) or donate to the Inle Trust.

Buddhist loving kindness meditation

Develop a loving attitude to yourself, and others

1 Breathe through your nose. Concentrate on each inhalation. Clear your mind and be mindful only of your breathing.

2 Allow thoughts to come and go, as they pop into your head. The goal is to let your thoughts arise, without pursuing them, just let them drift back out of your mind.

3 Now you're in a focused and contemplative state, you can work on sending feelings of love and happiness first to yourself and then to others.

Repeat, *'May I be well and happy. May I be happy and calm. May my mind be free from hatred, may my heart be filled with love.'*

4 Create an image of yourself, or a person you are thinking about, smiling and looking peaceful. Think of all your/their good qualities. When the feeling of loving kindness arises, focus on that feeling.

5 Radiate your feelings of universal kindness and love to the four directions of the compass. As you do, say to yourself, *'May all beings be safe, happy, healthy and live joyously.'*

6 Slowly start to focus on your breathing again and sense yourself in your body once more, feeling light and filled with love. ☸

