



Sitagu Buddha Vihara magazine 2016

English Session

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LET'S BUILD A COMMON PLATFORM, BY DR. ASHIN NYANASSARA

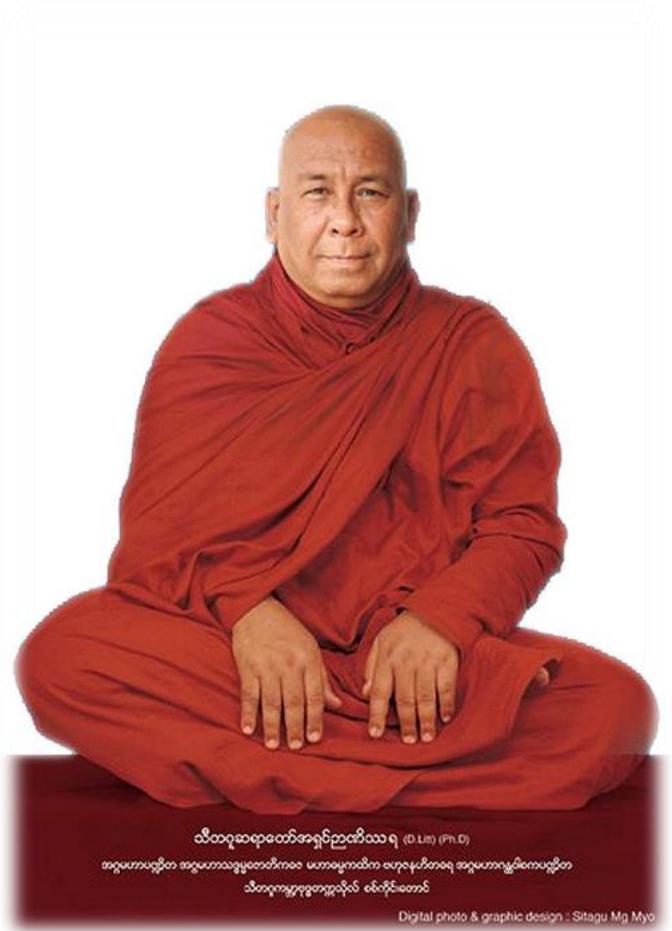
In commemoration of the Buddha's day which falls on the Full moon Day of May, known as Vesakha Punnima, I am very happy to take this opportunity to convey my sincere wishes, pure love, and boundless compassion to all beings in the whole world. Then I take great honor and appreciation in participating in this great celebration of the Buddha, The Greatest Teacher of men and gods celebrat at the Headquarter of United Nations in New York, USA.

This "Threefold Sacred Day" is the most significant and auspicious day for the Buddhist world, since Siddhattha Gotama was born at Lumbini Park in Nepal, attained supreme enlightenment, became the Buddha at Uruvela Forest near Gaya in India, passed into Parinibbana (final Demise) at Sala Forest in Uttaraparadesh of India. These three great events took place on this very full-moon day of May.

After His enlightenment, He lived for forty-five years as a Buddha, within 45 years the Buddha taught only the Dhamma. Dhamma is not a kind of Religious System, but it is a system to learn, to practice, to train, to understand for those who are keen to turn new leaves of life, and to convert from evil to noble.

Dhamma is an allmighty technique to solve the problems of mankind.

Many political leaders of the world have organized and formed and reformed many organizations in order to solve the problems of nations.



The United Nation Organization is a unique example in the world. But unity in diversity, diversity in unity, love

in hate, hate in love, association in separation etc. are unavoidable dualisms, this way and that nobody can find ultimate solutions for a nation in the world today.

Science and technology also never can find solutions for spirituality; they can search and research to end the problems of the world, but will only search on and on to no avail. The world of living beings is constituted of both mind and materiality. One of the Buddha's messages is "Mano pubbangama dhamma," that is, mind is forerunner, mind makes human life, mind is master of man, mind molds the human life, human beings are architects of their own lives, so, in order to create a beautiful life, we should mold our minds to be beautiful. Nowadays, the world of mankind is full of chaos, full of evil, full of battles, full of crime, full of sorrow and suffering. These unpleasant situations and miserable events are generated by evil minds. Many of Buddha's messages mention that the starting point of these miserable events is the selfishness thought of an egocentric world. The beginning of competition and conflict is the thought of jealousy or unhappiness about other's progress and success. Therefore, the Buddha emphatically stated that "you should exert yourself to convert from selfishness to selflessness, from jealousy to joy, from evil to nobility."

The message of the Buddha is absolute tolerance. Intolerance is the greatest enemy of all religions. The Buddha advised His disciples not to become angry, not to

be discontented, even not to be displeased when others speak of ill of Him and His teaching. If you show displeasure, you will only bring yourself into danger of spiritual loss. Another one of His profound messages is to exercise loving-kindness toward every living being making no distinction whatever. He clearly stated that loving-kindness and tolerance are the foundation for the spirit of brotherhood of all nations and all religions.

This universal spirit of brotherhood of loving-kindness, boundless compassion and great tolerance will break down all barriers separating one nation from another. If we followers of different faiths cannot meet on a common platform like brothers and sisters, simply because we belong to different religions then, surely, the noble religious leaders will have failed in the noble missionary services for the cause of humanity. So, we religious leaders try to remove such

evil spirits of internal enemies from everyone's respective religious standpoint. So, to solve the common problems of all nations we should build a common platform to walk on together. This is our common platform: the thought of selflessness, the thought of sincere wishes, the thought of pure love, the thought of compassion, the thought of tolerance and the thought of right understanding, What we are? Where we are?

What do we have to do?

May all beings in suffering be liberated from suffering.

May all beings in danger be liberated from danger.

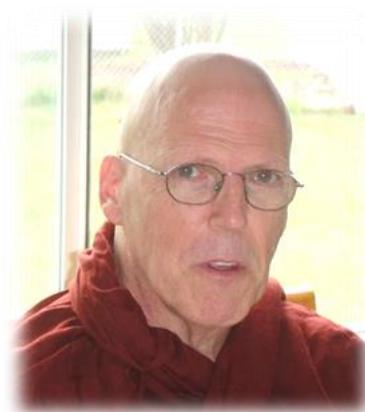
May all beings in sorrow be liberated from sorrow.

- Sitagu Sadayaw -

EAST MEETS WEST AT SBV: A PROGRESS REPORT, BY DR. ASHIN CINTITA

The Sitagu Buddha Vihara has two primary missions. The first is to support the spiritual and community needs of Burmese families who have emigrated to the Austin area. The second is to offer the Triple Jewell to those products of old emigrations (“the Americans”) ready to accept this precious gift. This report concerns progress in fulfilling the *second* of these missions.

Established on Honeycomb Drive twenty years ago with the indispensable aid of local Burmese Buddhists and at the incentive of Sitagu Sayadaw, the monastery began attracting some participation from the Americans almost



immediately. Undoubtedly key factors in this were the extraordinary character and advanced education of the monks that Sitagu Sayadaw had chosen to come here from Myanmar, along with the heartfelt hospitality that comes naturally to Burmese communities. Some of the very early American participants are still active in the life of the monastery to this day. I myself first began visiting the monastery out of curiosity in 2004, as a priest at the Austin Zen Center. Since ordaining in Myanmar and becoming resident at SBV as “the American monk,” I have naturally assumed a special role as a bridge between East and West. Among our initiatives:

- Classes have been offered increasingly in English as well as in Burmese. This includes classes for children, in which American kids have participated alongside Burmese, a regular *Abhidhamma* class, and classes based on the Pali Suttas, taught in a manner sensitive to Western religious and cultural predilections. We have made use of four spaces for teaching classes at SBV: the Dhamma Hall, the Shwezigon Pagoda, the Dhamma-Ceti Library and the dining hall.
- Increasingly Westerners have become active in vihara activities and in volunteer services to the vihara. Many are drawn here by festival events, to which we extend open invitations, particularly targeting our neighbors in our dissemination of fliers. Many are drawn here by marketing of particular English-language classes on the Internet. Many people

potentially interested in either Buddhism or meditation simply find sitagu.org/austin/ on the Web. And many hear about us by word of mouth.

- Alongside this newsletter, we also disseminate Sitagu's free English-language publications in our library. Our library is organized approximately half and half into Burmese-language and English-language sections. Books are available for lending on all aspects of Buddhism, along with works on Burmese culture and many general-interest topics.
- Our monks have made many public presentations in English, including our founder Sitagu Sayadaw, primarily by invitation to universities, schools and other religious institutions. In recent years, I personally now receive recurring invitations of this sort. We also have active relations with other Buddhist centers and have participated in programs for interfaith understanding.

It should be noted that penetrating Western culture with the message of the Buddha is a daunting task, a task once compared to holding a lotus flower to a rock and waiting for it to take root. Although the interest in Buddhism's gentle contemplative approach to life is attractive to many Westerners, and the interest in meditation, in particular, as a kind of workout for the mind is large, nonetheless, Western culture has not been subject to centuries of the shaping and molding influence of the Buddhadhamma in

the way the cultures of Myanmar and many other Asian lands have. In fact, many common tendencies in American culture run quite counter to Buddhist values and understandings. In spite of its many strengths, America and the West has for centuries been subject to the growth of what in Buddhist terms might be regarded as "pernicious views."

America has a complex religious culture whose influences often run in opposite directions. Let me highlight a few common pernicious tendencies that challenge, and will continue to challenge, the growth and prosperity of the Buddhadasana in America.

The first is a general distrust of religion, even among the religious. Much of this may have its source in Protestant Christianity, itself a protest movement against the Catholic Church that ended up rejecting much of ecclesiastical authority and often even the Catholic monastic tradition. The upshot is that Americans tend to find refuge and devotion difficult and do not really understand Sangha.

The second is the influence of scientific materialism in American thought, which gives priority of matter over mind. This runs counter to the Buddha's teaching that mind is the forerunner and makes Americans distrustful of the transcendent value of the contemplative practice. It also carries annihilationism as a corollary, which the Buddha associates with moral irresponsibility.

The third is rampant consumerism driven by a massive

media-enabled manipulative marketing industry that works by stimulating the worst factors of human character, its greed, its hatred and its delusion. It is difficult to promote Buddhist values like like renunciation in the midst of such an onslaught. The temptation is a market-based response to promote and sell particular practices and teachings and teachers as commodities. The real danger in entrusting the Sasana to the consumer market is that the market inevitably vulgarizes whatever it sells. The danger is that Buddhism, if it is to survive in this way, will go the way of fast food, pill popping and televangelism.

The fourth alarming tendency in American culture is hyper-individualism. I've come to think of much of American Buddhism as like a gaggle of teenagers, full of hubris, thinking they know it all, but not really aware of the degree to which they are still dependent upon their parents. Their parents, or at least their grandparents, are in Asia, the *sayadaws* who live in a tradition and a culture that has maintained Buddhism in its pristine purity for many centuries.

SBV is an civilizing extension of that tradition into the Wild West of Buddhism, and its mission must be quite orthodox. The ways we at SBV have begun slowly to address the inconsistencies between Buddhist and American cultures includes the following:

- In recent years I along with American volunteers have taught ESL classes for our Burmese monks that have

focused also on teaching sensitivity to American religious culture. We have discussed with our friends at the American Bodhi Center in Hempstead and the Jade Temple in Houson the concept of regular instruction of this nature for Asian monks of all nationalities who would like to engage in missionary work, perhaps even in the form of a summer institute.

- Along with my own ongoing study, research and teaching, I have chosen to focus much of my writing on the areas of tension between Buddhist tradition and Western cultural predilections. I have written two books, *Through the Looking Glass* and *A Culture of Awakening*, that take on many of these tensions, and made them available on request to our community members. I am writing a third book on the key doctrine of rebirth that will look at its traditional presentation and justification alongside the habit of many Westerners to reject the doctrine out of hand.

The monastic or institutional Sangha traditionally has a particularly central role in holding the lotus flower to the rock. Walpola Rahula, author of *What the Buddha Taught*, has written:

“It is the members of the “Institutional Sangha,” the bhikkhus, who have been the custodians of the Dhamma, and have transmitted it throughout these twenty-five centuries for the perpetuation of the Sasana (Buddhism). It is the “Institutional Sangha” that can be established in a country as an organized, visible representative body of

the Sangha of the Three Jewels. So those interested in the establishment and perpetuation of the Sasana in the West must be concerned with the establishment of the Bhikkhu-sangha there.”

Buddhaghosa's fifth century *Vinaya* Commentary *Samanta-Pāsādikā* makes the following rather remarkable assertion (the *Vinaya* is the Buddha's monastic code):

“The *Vinaya* is the life of the Sasana: if the *Vinaya* endures, the Sasana will endure; if the *Vinaya* disappears, the Sasana will disappear.”

Nonetheless, the general success in the development of an American Sangha has been very spotty indeed. Most American Buddhists have never encountered a monk or nun. The number of American monastics across the nation is probably in the low hundreds, though signs of growth are encouraging. Nonetheless, SBV has made some important contributions addressing this deficit:

- I ordained in Myanmar in 2009 at the invitation of Ashin Ariyadhamma and with Sitagu Sayadaw as my preceptor. I returned to SBV in 2010 and, most significantly, have been as happy as a clam in my monastic role and intend to wear the robes for life.
- A series of Westerners and others have joined many Burmese youths each year in the tradition of *temporary* monastic ordination, as bhikkhus and as nuns.

- Our very first ordination in the newly completed Shwezigon Pagoda produced an American life-long bhikkhu. Ven. Nalaka currently lives at the Austin Buddhist Vihara, a Sri Lankan monastery up in Pflugerville, to whom we make available our consecrated sima space, as we do to all local monasteries.
- We now have a second Western Sitagu monk, Ven. Dhammananda, born in England. He has contributed an article to this newsletter, so I will let him introduce himself.

We began this report by identifying SBV's two primary missions, the first on behalf of Burmese families and the second on behalf of Americans. It should be noted that in the long run the first mission will succeed only if the second does. The reason is that the younger and future generations of Burmese families will identify progressively more with American culture. I personally hope that the younger generations will retain not only a devout relationship to Buddhism, but also the rich Burmese culture and language. America has been a product of many cultural influences and the beautiful and wholesome Burmese culture can only improve the mix. Reaching out to the future generations of Burmese will meet the same challenges found currently in reaching out to Americans.

Moreover, it should be noted that modernity has been sweeping across Asia carrying many of the same

pernicious cultural influences inimical to Buddhism that are already established in general American culture, with unfortunate results. For instance, the number of monastics in Myanmar's neighbor Thailand has decreased by 50% in a short twenty years. So far Myanmar has been largely spared this influence, but it will come. Our success in bringing Buddhism to America may ultimately bear on our success in preserving Buddhism in its pristine purity in Myanmar itself.

- Dr. Ashin Cintita -

MEETING THE WHITE MARBLE BUDDHA, BY MARIANNE MITCHELL

What prepares a person like myself who has trained in Zen Buddhism for the first sighting of an all white, two and a half ton marble Buddha with flashing lights making a halo behind him, and on the floor in front of him people have placed many bowls of fruit and vases of flowers? I would have thought I would have carried Zen training with me to meet this new experience encountered in a new temple. I had many years of learning the Zen curriculum where doing only one thing at a time is the goal and that be done in the simplest way possible. This training even included watching how you used words. One vase, one bowl as a Buddha offering would be enough and definitely flashing lights would be considered excessive. And how about

just one Buddha in the Buddha hall, not 24 all in the robes of their countries.



But there was no trace of the Zen experience there with me, although it had somehow prepared me to fully embrace this new experience and joy sprang up. What could be simpler than an all white Buddha, no distractions of other colors or textures. And yet its size took it to another dimension. Seated it didn't rise that much above

those on the floor in front of him and yet his presence was huge. Now there's a math problem for you--how does size make you think differently? Somehow the teachings emanated from this single block of stone carved by a single master Burmese artist and although it took 2500 years or so to get here and then via an ocean journey on a ship from Burme, the west is now blessed with this gift from Myanmar, Sitagu Sayadaw, the Burmese people and Burmese Americans.

- Marianne Mitchell -

THE ESTEEMED GIFT, BY WIN BO

Located in the south west side of Austin, Texas, Sitagu Buddha Vihara monastery lays serene and majestic in a tranquil neighborhood. From the entrance, one can see the magnificent golden pagoda, a replica of Shwe Si Gon temple in Bagan, a thousand-year-old city in Burma. This is by far the largest traditional Burmese style pagoda in the United States. Architected by skilled artisans from Burma, the pagoda has three entrances - one each from north, south and west directions - each having a teak wooden door adorn with intricate carvings. Inside in the center against the eastern wall is the four-thousand-pound marble Buddha statue sculptured from a single block of marble by a top sculptor from Mandalay. On each side of the marble statue are two lacquerware Buddha statues that were made in Bagan. Against the remaining three walls, there are 24 smaller Buddha statues, 8

on each wall, each depicting the cultural style from different era's and locations. If you look up at the ceiling, beyond the chandelier in the middle lie hundreds of small Buddha statues each in its own niche on the circular walls leading to the inside-top of the pagoda. The art work and the design is awe-inspiring and in very few places in the United States can one see such fine traditional Burmese art works.

Next to the pagoda is the Dhamma hall large enough to accommodate 50 to 100 people. Inside the hall facing the direction of the pagoda is yet another Buddha statue, about 8 feet tall, in a sitting position. It is also a replica from one of the pagodas in Bagan, and illustrates a rare posture for a Buddha statue. On the ceiling and against the upper side of the walls are drawing art works depicting the life of the Buddha from his birth through his enlightenment to his passing away. The drawings were replicas of the drawings from the walls of the pagodas in Bagan as well.

To the east of the golden temple, spread across the width of the lot, one can see over forty meditation cottages and monks' residences among the trees with winding concrete pathways connecting the buildings. Across from the pagoda on the west side is a large 1600 square-foot deck and a brick building which is the kitchen and dining hall where monks and visitors can enjoy Burmese style food.

In addition to the visually stunning cultural esthetics and art works, Sitagu Buddha Vihara monastery offers religious services of well-learned monks, all of whom have earned their doctorate degrees. Religious ceremonies as well as Burmese

cultural activities are held four times a year, together with many donation offerings for various occasions throughout the year. Ashin Ariyadhamma, the abbot of the monastery and head of the Sitagu missionary in the United States, together with Ashin Aggadhamma, Ashin Saccanyanna, and Ashin Cintita are resident monks who offer Theravada Buddhism classes and provide counseling. It indeed is a auspicious place for earning merits - an unwritten life-long task of any Buddhist who seeks the ultimate goal of liberation.

This splendid place is the monastery of Theravada Dhamma Society of America, founded by Venerable Dr. Ashin Nyanissara aka Sitagu Sayadaw in 1992. Sitagu Sayadaw is nationally known for his missionary and charitable projects throughout Burma and in several other countries. Sitagu Sayadaw himself envisioned it, raised the funds, arranged artisans for key construction structures, provided all the Buddha statues and transported Burmese traditional art works from Burma to Austin. Sayadaw also provided the monastery with its most valuable assets - learned monks from his missionary in Burma.

A place for learning and practicing Buddhism, it is truly an invaluable gift from Sitagu Sayadaw to us all. Imagine the difficulties we would otherwise have to do any meritorious deed such as offering donations, ordaining monks, or learning in-depth knowledge about Theravada Buddhism. Without the monastery, where can we learn first hand about Buddha's teachings; where can we seek spiritual solace when something unfortunate happen to us; where can we turn to for teaching our kids the Buddhist values, the cultural heritage

and traditions; or where can we hold cultural festivities and gatherings?

Like many in Austin and Texas, I feel very fortunate and very grateful for such a gift. However, along with a great gift like this, comes the responsibilities. What shall we, as benefactors, do to be more deserving of it? What shall we do to make it a lasting gift?

Here are some of my thoughts broken down into do's and don'ts:

Please do:

1. Support the monks - Without them, this would not be a true monastery. Without the teachers, this will not be a place for learning and betterment of oneself. Support them with food donations, nawakarma donations, provide suggestions for managing the monastery and its activities, and lend a hand when they need one.
2. Participate in the activities - Facilities are to benefit many and without use, they do not serve the purpose. Make the best use of the monastery with care and respect. Learn about Buddhism more deeply and practice it. Be part of the ceremonies and celebrations. Participate and help out in the monastery's activities. Bring friends and visitors to give them an opportunity to participate in activities such as meditation sessions on Sunday evenings. Make it a place for quiet reflection and introspection.
3. Take care of the facilities - It is everyone's job to take care of the facilities because this gift is for everyone in the

community. Each can do a small part to help with the upkeep of the facilities - every little thing like not loitering, keeping things clean, conserving electricity, minimizing the expenses, and taking care of the surrounding environment can go a long way when every one pitch in. Almost every weekend there is one volunteer group that anyone can participate for cleaning up the monastery.

4. Uphold the monastery's reputation - All the efforts with good intentions will be less effective if the monastery does not have a good reputation. Its reputation is up kept by the monks and the lay supporters, and everyone should be fully aware of it. We should refrain from doing anything inappropriate at the monastery.
5. Uphold the Sitagu determination - Sitagu Sayadaw has already provided the guidelines in the Sitagu determination on how we should strive towards betterment:

With no thought of pride or glory,

With utmost humility,

We resolve to make better

The world we live in and

To promote our Sasana,

To the best of our ability.

6. Learn how to communicate with the monks - The monks categorically are considered one of the Triple Gem that all

Buddhists pay homage to, so they are to be treated with utmost respect. Having to abide by 227 rules as an ordained monk, they also have many restrictions in dealing with lay people. Learn the protocols and proper way to offer food or donations, how to address them, and how to speak to them. It will benefit both sides.

7. Try to get the most merit of all kinds and in all ways - The vihara is the place to help obtain merit, so make sure you earn as much merit as you can. Keep the right mental attitude and the right mental reflection (yoniso-manasikara) to remove mental hindrances and maintain a peaceful state of mind in whatever you do at the vihara.

Please do not:

1. Abuse the facilities - The facilities are there for the benefit of all, and we as benefactors owe it to ourselves to maintain and keep them in the best shape. So help out in anyway to keep the ground clean and the facilities properly utilized and maintained.
2. Make unproductive criticisms - There are more than one way to do things and furthermore, there are more than one correct way to do it. Several decisions may have been made and will be made that some may not agree with. However, be understanding that all are made with the best of intention and the best the responsible parties know how to make. If one is passionate about what one thinks is the right way to do, please bring it to the attention of the monks and they are more than willing to listen to the suggestions.



3. Involve in social competition - Vihara is not a place to be pompous nor is it a place for social competition. It is a place to be humble and a place for contemplation.

4. Dress inappropriately - Wearing an appropriate address is one way to be respectful of the monks and the others.

Sitagu Buddha Vihara is an esteemed gift to all of us from Sitagu Sayadaw. This is a gift essential for our spiritual well-being. A gift is most valuable when it is highly useful and lasts a long time. If we fail to recognize and appreciate this gift, make the best use of it, or make it lasting, it will be a great loss that we bring upon ourselves.

Dhammapada:12

Those who knows the essential to be essential and the unessential to be unessential, dwelling in the right thoughts, do arrive at the essential.

- Win Bo -

ESSENTIAL FOR LIFE! BY WENDY BIXBY

Water is essential for life, until we attain Nibbana!

Our brain and heart being made up of over 80% water may also become purified by our pure intentions of donating drinking water. Every drop of drinking water is beneficial to all living beings and the practice of donating brings us closer to realizing Nibbana.

Earth is covered by 70% water, salt water makes up 97% and of the drinkable water 1.7% is frozen in glaciers. Over 750 million people lack safe drinking water. In Africa and Asia people may walk an average of nearly 4 miles to collect water.

Sitagu Sayadaw, founder of our Austin Sitagu Buddha Vihara, initiated, organized and has maintained his Sitagu Water donation project for over 33 years. Sitagu Sayadaw is a magnificent role model and leader in social welfare of Buddhist communities especially in Myanmar's dry zone. Sagaing Hills is rich in dhamma and has over 1,000 monasteries and nunneries. Since 1982 Sitagu water project has provided over 500,000 gallons of water per day benefiting over 10,000 monks, novices and nuns. Sitagu Sayadaw's water project requires 50 miles of water pipe and about a dozen reservoirs and at least 3 pump stations to safely share Ayeyarwady River water in

Sagaing Hills.

Big Spring's devotees assist in the flow of city water to Austin Sitagu Buddha Vihara by supporting the water pipeline project completed in 2007.

Ko Myo Aung initiated weekly 5 gallon bottles of drinking water delivery to our vihara and in 2003 Ko Win Bo, Than Than Shwe, and I inherited this lovely opportunity. We would share in taking the 5 gallon bottles to refill at HEB and then carry back to vihara every week. Later I was able to receive this responsibility happily (especially since I do not cook). Thanks to all of you who help me unload these 40lb treasures. I think it is a Buddhist teaching about the 8 qualities our water should have when we donate it and what these ideas of qualities help us to develop in our selves.

1. Cool = develop pure moral discipline, sila
2. Delicious taste = abundance of delicious foods and water in your future
3. Light = bliss of physical suppleness
4. Soft = mind calm and gentle
5. Clear = mind clear and alert
6. Sweet smelling = powerful purification of negative karma
7. Good for digestion = reduce illness
8. Soothes the throat = beautiful and powerful speech

So you can see why I am so happy to have our 5 gallon bottled water account be from The Pure Water Stop! So far we carry the bottles to and from ourselves and maybe in the future we too will have delivery service if needed. Did you know that all our tap water is drinkable! We are so lucky to have abundance at our finger tips. I encourage you to practice Water Dana every day. Whether you offer Mr. Yellow or Mr. White kitties, your friend, or even your teacher a cup of water you have a chance to delight in your determination to share and fulfill a need. All practices of giving will aid us in our efforts to purify our minds. Your generous wholesome intention may eradicate suffering in 3 ways.

1. Reduce attachment and weaken craving
2. Happy future births in favorable conditions to learn and practice pure Buddha Dhamma
3. Develop virtue, concentration and wisdom (sila, sammadhi, panna) and therefore knowing the Eight Fold Noble Path and thus leading you to Nibanna

In most modern health magazines, you may read the how our bodies, which are 60% water, benefits from drinking water.

- Flush out toxins and weight loss
- Reduce stress
- Reduce fatigue

- Look younger with healthy skin moisture and elasticity
- Increased productivity
- Balanced, alert, good mood, increased concentration
- Proper body temperature
- Increase digestion and decrease constipation
- Rid self of muscle cramps and strains
- Less likely to get sick

Check out this list of benefits that the monks been telling us for over a decade now....

Benefits of Donating Water

1. Longevity
2. Beauty
3. Happiness
4. Strength
5. Wisdom
6. Purity
7. Healthy
8. Plenty of friends
9. No thirst

10. Active, agile, alert

Fluidity is important in so many ways, whether its pumping the water uphill through 50 miles of pipeline, or by the way our healthy bodies move or by how thoughts in our minds flow, fluidity is a must. Cohesion is a profound concept; however, with regards to our community, let's offer each other a cup of drinking water. When we kind heartedly offer even a single drop of water to a living being we have a chance to attain Nibbana. All of this is essential for life!

- Wendy Bixby -

MAKING MERIT IN THE ECONOMY OF GIFTS, BY ASHIN CINTITA

This article is adapted from Ashin Cintita's draft book, *Foundations of Buddhism*, which he has been using to teach courses at SBV.

Merit (puñña) is a kind of composite measure of the ethical value of a karmic action, a tool that incorporates both external consequences and intentions. Karma that is of benefit to others and at the same time is well-intentioned is meritorious, and will accordingly produce good fruits. Generosity is the practice of gaining merit, or of merit-making. Karma that brings harm to others and is also ill-intentioned is demeritorious. Breaking and thereby causing harm is demerit (pāpa). The merit or

demerit of an action represents its expected karmic fruit, and the terms are generally used in the context of quantifying this.

Conventional generosity is sometimes described in relation to relative amounts of merit gained. For instance, a high amount of merit is attributed to certain categories of *recipients*, certain categories of *gifts*, certain *manners* of giving and certain *intentions* behind giving.

- 1- The recipient. Worthy recipients of generosity are ascetics and priests (who live on alms), destitutes, wayfarers, wanderers, the sick and beggars, as well as family members and guests. The purity of the recipient correlates with the amount of merit made. For instance, offerings to those of great spiritual attainment gain oodles of merit. (DN 5, DN 23, DN 26)
- 2- What is given. The gift of Dhamma (*dhamma-dāna*) exceeds all other gifts, which tends to give monastics an edge in merit-making. It is important to note that the merit earned correlates inversely with one's resources, for instance, a meager offering from a pauper might easily earn more merit than a sumptuous gift from a tycoon. This is because it is the intentions that count. Although most gifts are material, the gift of service (*veyyāvacca*) is also very meritorious. (SN 1.32, Dh 224)
- 3- Manner. The Buddha recommends that offerings

never be given in a callous manner, but rather respectfully, not in a way that humiliates the recipient and ideally with one's own hands rather than through an intermediary. It is also best to give at a proper time and to give what is not harmful (AN 5.148).

Notice that these recommendations encourage direct engagement in, and full experience of, the act of giving. In this way, these measures encourage feelings of friendship, appreciation and interpersonal harmony in association with the act of generosity. They also enhance the personal benefit of giving, to such a degree that one begins to lose track of who is the giver and who is the receiver in a particular transaction. This manner of giving would also suggest that it is better to be actively present at the orphanage one is donating too rather than simply writing out a periodic check, or arranging an automatic fund transfer. Notice that that would also allow one more closely to track the consequences, for harm or benefit, of one's generosity.

4- Intention. One might give with different intentions: out of annoyance, fear, in exchange, thinking generosity is considered good, to gain a good reputation, out of kindness, aware of the karmic consequences, or to “*beautify and adorn the mind.*” The first are fairly neutral with regard to merit, since in each case one is generally taking as much as giving. The last gains a truckload of merit. (AN 8.31) Again, we find intention to be critical, for merit ultimately is

about purity of mind. In general, it is best to give with no expectation of personal benefit. (AN 7.52)

Also, if we feel happy before, during and after giving we are in the swing of this practice (AN 6.37). Then,

When this gift of mine is given, it makes the mind serene. Gratification & joy arise. (AN 7.49)

Accordingly, we should take care that there is later no resentment for having given (SN 3.20). The purest form of giving is with the attitude:

This is an ornament for the mind, a support for the mind. (AN 7.49)

Notice how the Buddha's emphasis in discussing generosity moves freely from benefit for others to pleasant personal experience and back again. Pure acts of giving are expected to gladden the heart and contribute to the development of personal character. This creates some confusion concerning motives: are we practicing generosity for *them* or for *us*, out of benevolence or out of selfishness? The paradox about generosity is that it gains most merit for us when it is most selfless and least merit when it is most selfish. It feels great when our intention is to benefit others. This is an immediate experience of the fruits of karma. The answer is that we and others benefit together.

It should be appreciated how the practice of conventional generosity is adapted to the structure of the traditional Buddhist community, in which the relationship of laity to

monastic has played a central role since the time of the Buddha and still does in Buddhist lands to this day. The Buddha gave great attention, in the *Vinaya*, the monastic code, to organizing and regulating the monastic community to a level that seems to have been unknown in other ascetic communities of his time, with full understanding that the lay behavior would shape itself to the behavior of the monastics. Alms-giving, the support of ascetics in various traditions, was already prevalent in India at the time of the Buddha, and is naturally a part of conventional generosity and merit-making for Buddhists.



Moreover, the Buddha did something interesting: He imposed on the monastic community, through the monastic precepts, an enhanced level of dependence on the laity, removing them entirely from the exchange economy and making their dependence a matter of daily

contact with the laity. He made the monks and nuns as helpless as house pets or as young children with regard to their own needs, but did not substantially restrict what monastics can do for others. The result is that monastics live entirely – at least, this is the ideal – in what has been called an *economy of gifts*, in which goods and services flow entirely through acts of generosity. Laity participate in this economy in their interactions with monastics, but the economy also naturally generalizes to the larger community; generosity is the lifeblood of the Buddhist community, and the conventional interaction between lay and monastic its heart. In Burma, for instance, I observed how readily this classical practice of generosity carries beyond the monastery walls, how people naturally take care of each other with a sense of obligation that requires no compensation. The Buddha fashioned an economy particularly conducive to the practice of conventional generosity. Although the same *material* benefits might be realized in an exchange economy, the economy of gifts affords more opportunity for *merit-making*, which is to say, for karmic results and the personal development of purity of mind.

- Ashin Cintita -

A WONDERFUL YEAR IN MYANMAR, BY ASHIN DHAMANADA

In October, 2014, I requested ordination to become a monk in a Buddhist Theravada tradition within the Sitagu organisation. I was already ordained into a Vajrayana non-monastic tradition. Sitagu Sayadaw Dr. Ashin Nyannissara requested that I travel to Myanmar and go into retreat for six months, after which he would grant ordination. I sold my house and gave away my possessions and after a month long pilgrimage to the holy Buddhist sites of India, landed in Myanmar in February, 2015. My wonderful year in Myanmar had begun.



I walked across the immigration hall of Yangon International Airport, dressed in the robes of a Vajrayana monk and joined the line leading to the immigration desk. As I stood waiting I was approached by a uniformed immigration officer.

“Bhante, please follow me.” She politely requested.

Now I am not sure that it is a good thing to be pulled out of line by a uniformed person in an immigration hall.

Usually, it would perhaps be a prelude to trouble. However, in this instance it appears that because I was a monk, albeit, of a different tradition to the Burmese Theravada tradition I am ushered to the desk reserved for diplomats!

“What is the purpose of your visit to Myanmar, Bhante?” She asks.

“Meditation, study of the Dhamma and ordination into the Theravada tradition.” I reply.

“Welcome to Myanmar, Bhante. Enjoy your stay.”

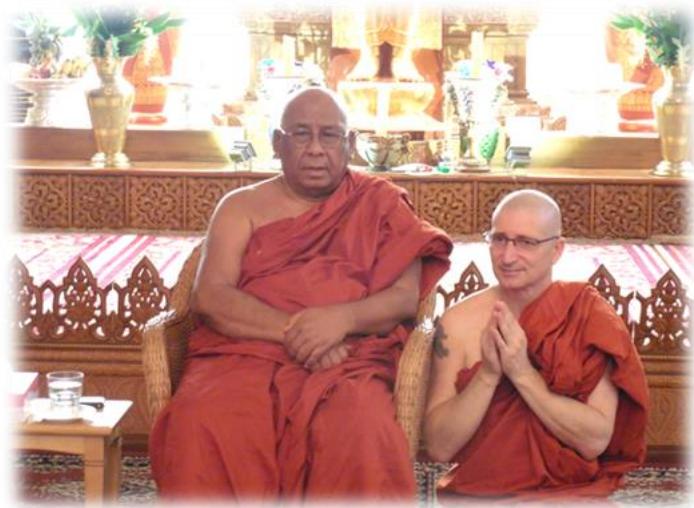
She stamps my passport and hands it back to me.

This first experience of Myanmar was to be the hallmark of my entire visit. The deep faith and respect the people of Myanmar have for the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, which they demonstrate in so many ways in their everyday actions and behavior. Everywhere one turns there are reminders you are in a Buddhist country, the pagodas, the monks and nuns, but most of all the faith and devotion of the people, with genuine generosity, kindness and humility.

In those first few minutes I knew I was going to fall in love with Myanmar.

After a few days in Yangon, I went to the Panditarama Forest Retreat Center in Bago to begin my six-month retreat. In the evening of the first day I receive instructions for meditation. The meditation technique is

different to other techniques I have learned in the past. The practice is as taught by Mahasi Sayadaw and rather than taking the breath at the nostrils as the object of meditation, one observes the rise and fall of the abdomen, noting the tightening, tension, hardening of the abdomen during the rising and the release, relaxation and softening during the fall. Then one notes whatever other phenomena arise, mental or physical objects, like thoughts, feelings, emotions, pain, itching and so on. After noting one always returns to the primary object of the meditation, the rise and fall of the abdomen.



With my kind Spiritual Father

Between sitting meditations one engages in walking meditation. I had never done walking meditation before so it is completely new to me and in the beginning it was

painful. After a couple of days it feels like I have been to the gym and done an excessive number of calf raises and lunges! My muscles are sore and aching. All aches and pains seem to dissipate after a couple of weeks as my body adjusts to the routine of walking and sitting meditation.

Meditators are also encouraged to undertake all activities slowly, noting constantly, so practice becomes continuous and includes all the daily activities. This means every waking moment is an opportunity for meditation, observing and noting phenomena as they arise and pass away.

The schedule at Panditarama begins at 3am, as we are awoken by a very loud drum! Arriving at the meditation hall at 3:30am beginning with walking meditation, followed by a sitting meditation at 4am, with chanting beginning at 4:50am. Then a procession to breakfast at 5:10am arriving at the dining hall by about 5:30am

Meditation resumes from 7-10 am, lunch is at 10:30am. After lunch, we return to meditation from noon to 5pm followed by a break for juice and a shower. We return to the Dhamma Hall at 6pm for a Dhamma talk. After the Dhamma talk meditation resumes until Metta chanting, finishing at 9pm. We return to room for bed. Meditators are not supposed to go to sleep immediately but are encouraged to continue sitting and walking meditation practice until 11pm.

Every two or three days one reports to the teacher for an

interview to review one's practice and to receive helpful advice to improve one's practice to make progress. One keeps a meditation journal to note down one's experiences as an aide memoire for the interview.

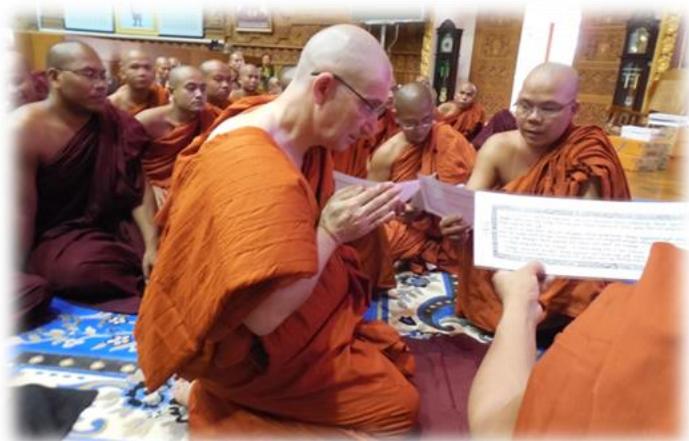
While I am in retreat for six months, every day is a challenge, some days are more or less challenging, but all are challenging. The routine is relentless and inescapable. However, I learned a lot about meditation and about myself that continue to impact me and my meditation practice in positive ways.

The retreat ended for me in August and I returned to the Sitagu International Buddhist Academy in Yangon, where, with great good fortune, Sitagu Sayadaw was in residence. I requested to see him to pay my respects and to request ordination. To my great surprise he chose my name and then organised my lower ordination for that evening and he would be my preceptor. In all our conversations he was very kind and has since provided everything I need to be a monk. I feel very privileged and grateful.

Sayadaw then instructed me to go to his monastery in Sagaing to receive higher ordination and stay for six months. His final instruction was to be happy in the monastery in Sagaing and then to return to the Sitagu monastery in Texas and to live there in seclusion and to be happy.

The next day I travelled to Sagaing by overnight bus. When I arrived I was greeted by Dr. U Kumara, the

Rector of the Sitagu International Buddhist Academy, and he informed me that my ordination would take place that afternoon.



Higher ordination, Sitagu International Buddhist Academy, Sagaing

Having been presented with the requisites by kind lady donors and in the presence of about 50 monks I was granted full ordination. This was the fulfilment of a long held desire and the beginning of a new phase in my life.



With my kind donors after ordination

Following my ordination, I stayed at SIBA in Sagaing for six months and visited many local pagodas and also visited Bagan and Mandalay. Sitagu Sayadaw provided teachers for the study of the Vinaya, Suttanta and Abhidhamma.



U-min Thon-ze Pagoda, Sagaing

Before my return to Texas I undertook a ten day Vipassana retreat at the Dhamma Joti Retreat Center, Yangon. Finally, I made a visit to the Shwedagon pagoda, full of gratitude, to meditate and make offerings to the Buddha at this holy site.

- Ashin Dhammananda -



Making offerings at the Shwedagon

SITAGU SAYADAW ARRIVES IN NASHVILLE, BY HAPPY HEILMAN

A biography of Sitagu Sayadaw, the first in the English language, is now in the works, coordinated by Dr. Tin Nyunt and involving numerous people in the Sitagu community. Our good friends Happy and Barbara have agreed to recount some of their experiences over many years in connection with Sitagu Sayadaw to enrich the text. This and the next article are two such accounts. – Ashin Cintita



My wife, Barbara, and I first met Sayadaw in the early 1980s when he first visited Nashville and the newly established Buddhist Temple of Nashville. He came to stay for a much longer period around 1990-1992 after his famous sermon on the duties of the King as described by the Buddha. This Temple had been established in the early 1980's as an ecumenical Buddhist temple for the influx of Buddhist refugees from S.E. Asia. The Temple was located in an old decommissioned Baptist church in a poor and rough neighborhood in East Nashville. The church was in disrepair, the roof leaked, and the building was unheated by that time. As I recall, it was late fall/early winter 1983, quite chilly in the building. One small

room, maybe for the church secretary, had been cleaned up, outfitted with bed and desk, and, most importantly, a small space heater to keep the room warm. Sayadaw had also installed a large map of the United States.

At this time, neither I nor any of the other native Americans who frequented the Temple had any idea that this very friendly, intelligent monk was any more important or famous than any of the other monks who had stayed at the Temple over the years. I would come every week to this warm little office/home and Sayadaw would teach me Dhamma for about thirty minutes. Then I would go meditate for an hour in a large, empty, very chilly room, listening to the water dripping down through the leaky roof into buckets placed strategically around the floor. Then I would happily return to the warm, cozy office, where I would answer Sayadaw's many questions about America. We studied the U.S. map very carefully, with Sayadaw asking questions about this city, that state, about the people in a certain part of the country. He was curious to know everything about the people, the customs, the geography, the weather.... So in return for his teaching me the Dhamma, I was teaching him about America!

Little did I know at the time that he shared this same keen interest in the whole world, and would eventually visit almost every part of it in his role as world Buddhist ambassador. But his long and successful career began in that humble Temple in Nashville, Tennessee, and I am

proud to say that I am still his loyal student 30 years later.

- Happy Heilman -

HOW WE MET SITAGU SAYADAW, BY BARBARA HEILMAN

In this global world of the 21st Century, there are few leaders with the wisdom to bring to fruition people's hopes and dreams and who embody noble principles which we all should endeavor to follow. Our Sitagu Sayadaw, Ashin Nyanissara, is such a leader. We have known him for over 30 years, and he always amazes us by the standards he sets for countless people to follow. The world-wide community of Buddhists has grown larger and stronger in practice and good deeds because of this Venerable Sayadaw.

When my husband, Happy, and I first met Sayadaw in 1983 in Nashville, Tennessee, we were just beginning on the Buddhist path together. We were a couple with a desire to meditate and study Buddhism. We had no traditional religious affiliation. There was only one Temple with resident monks in Nashville, and since that offered us an authentic path to follow, we started a Theravada Buddhist American meditation group in 1986-87 that met at the Temple once a week and was led by a Burmese monk. This monk was Sayadaw U Sacca Vamsa, who led our meditation and taught us to chant in

Pali. Usually, there were no more than eight of us at one time in this little group. Little did we know that our small world would change once Sayadaw U Nyanissara arrived to stay at the Temple.

THE BEGINNING OF OUR AMERICAN MEDITATION GROUP AND THE BUDDHIST TEMPLE IN NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

The beginnings of the Nashville Buddhist Temple started in the 1980's, when it sheltered a small number of monks from Theravada Buddhist countries, such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos and Burma. The founder of the Temple was U Win Myint, a Burmese man, who was on the faculty at Tennessee State University in Nashville. Professor Myint ran the Temple with a Board of Directors, and they were instrumental in sponsoring and getting green cards for the resident monks and providing the food and requisites they needed to live from day to day at our Temple. At that time there was no place where the monks could go on alms rounds for their food, and there were few people to drive them to appointments or classes. The Nashville Buddhist community was made up of groups of Southeast Asian immigrants who were new to the U.S., and who came in successive waves over the following decades. Simultaneously, Americans were exploring alternative religious paths. In Nashville, there were Tibetan and Zen Buddhist groups, as well as others with leanings toward meditation in the surrounding countryside outside of Nashville. The refugees who were

resettled in Nashville at that time were Cambodians and Laotians, and most were Theravada Buddhists. These were hard-working people who had to work several jobs at a time to make a living, learn English, master driving and life skills, and face a myriad of other hurdles besides trying to keep their religious and cultural heritage alive. There were also a number of Thai-American citizens, one of whom was Patty Myint, Professor Myint's wife, who ran the International Market and Restaurant beside Belmont University (a community favorite), and whose family supported Asian monks with many food donations and other necessities.

This was our foundation in Buddhist culture and religion at the very start of our journey. And then, into our small world came The Ven. Ashin Nyanissara. We had originally met him on his first trip to Nashville in 1983, but he returned to Nashville for a long residence at the Buddhist Temple in 1990-92. Sayadaw had a tremendous interest in the institutions of higher learning in Nashville, among them Vanderbilt University. He gave lectures at Vanderbilt on Buddhism, and he also studied the historical development of the University, and met a number of faculty members in various disciplines. Later, we came to understand how important the founding and administration of an institution of higher learning was to Sayadaw. He has gone on to establish many monasteries, three large universities for monks and nuns, hospitals, clinics and other charitable societies to support the people. He based the organization of these projects on

successful administrative models, such as Vanderbilt University.

During this extended stay, Sayadaw visited wide-spread parts of the United States. He wanted to see as much of the country as was possible. There were so many Burmese people who invited him to come visit them from all parts of the country. They would drive down to Nashville to pick him up and take him on a long journey to stay with a Burmese family and give a talk to other Burmese families in that community. He went without hesitation. The customs of Asian people were so different from our own way of life, but we accepted the differences quite easily. For example, Burmese men wear longyis, which are sarongs worn the Burmese way. So our male meditators, including Happy, wore longyis whenever a group of Burmese people came to pay homage to Sayadaw. He was our bridge between learning the Dhamma and putting it into practice in a community of the Sangha and lay followers. We learned how interdependent the monks and the followers were. The monks depended on the lay people for their material requisites and the lay people depended on the monks for their spiritual requisites.

THE PILGRIMAGE TO INDIA AND NEPAL, LED BY SITAGU SAYADAW

By the summer of 1992, Sayadaw had decided it was time to return to Myanmar. But first he was arranging for a Burmese pilgrimage to India, and he asked the core

members of our meditation group to accompany him. So we prepared to go on a religious pilgrimage with 32 people, including six Burmese monks, in the winter of 1992 - 1993. Among them were Happy and I, and Jennifer Conn, from Nashville. A pilgrimage is a journey of spiritual significance for Burmese Buddhists. Typically, if fortunate enough to go, they visit important shrines in India and Nepal: where the Buddha was born (Lumbini), where he was enlightened (Bodhgaya), where he gave his first teaching (Sarnath) and where he attained Mahaparinibbhana, or passed away (Kushinara). We started our pilgrimage at the caves of Ellora and Ajanta, then on to the magnificent grounds and the pagoda of Sanchi. Each place was a stop that the Burmese pilgrims knew and loved. Happy and I had no background in pilgrimages nor Buddhist archaeological sights. Sayadaw would provide the historical and geographical commentary in Burmese. On occasion, we boarded the bus and drove all day, just to come to a fallow field where now nothing remained. This would be a place where King Ashoka had once set up a pillar, or where the remains of an ancient earthen stupa were hardly visible, but Sayadaw wanted us to see the location nonetheless. There was a very revered old monk, Massoyin Sayadaw (of Sagaing), on our trip who recited many stories during our interminable rides on the bus. The Burmese would laugh very heartily at the anecdotes, and we really missed having them translated. We usually stopped at truck stops for the noon meal, when the women would take over the

lunch preparations for the monks. The Indian truckers would stare at us. All the provisions for lunch had been freshly prepared early in the morning before our departure, packed in baskets and loaded on top of the bus. Many spices, chilies and fish sauces were brought from Burma. It was an extraordinary part of our wonderful magical mystery tour. When we needed a toilet stop, the bus driver would stop the bus, and someone would rouse us with "Bush, bush," and men would head in one direction into the bush, women going in the other direction. Day after day, we rode together to make this the trip of a lifetime.

The pilgrimage actually began in Sri Lanka, and from there went to India and the Goenka Vipassana Center, Dhammagiri, in Igatpuri, India. Sitagu Sayadaw knew Goenka and also Dr. Panth, who headed the Vipassana Research Center at Dhammagiri. The monks sat a course given in Burmese. Goenka was not teaching the course this time, but he gave Dhamma talks on video every evening. The 10-day course in English was full, with 400 meditators. It was an excellent beginning to our pilgrimage. We kept Noble Silence during the course and received great benefit.

After the meditation course, we left for another 5 weeks of travel from one site to another in both India and Nepal, and we stayed in Burmese monasteries each evening and in a Burmese nunnery in Kathmandu. There were a few monasteries where only one monk had lived for many

years by himself. These were quite small and decrepit and I am sure the abbot was glad to have Sayadaw and his pilgrims stay there.

On that pilgrimage, I took a picture of Sayadaw that I love very much. He was smiling at a little Indian girl and holding a wee little goat he had taken from her, in a gentle, teasing manner. She was overcome, but Sayadaw was only teasing her. He was in a relaxed mood after we had visited the Uruvela Forest and the Niranjana River where Sujata had offered rice milk to Lord Buddha to nourish him after he firmly decided that he would sit down and not get up until he had attained Enlightenment. The forest was full of little children who roamed that place and who had swarmed our bus begging for change. There were so many children it was like a mob. But amidst all chaos Sayadaw saw a way to connect with one child and her baby goat as he boarded our bus. Chuckling, he handed her baby goat back to her, and she smiled hugely.

RETURN TO YANGON

After completing this long and wonderful pilgrimage, we flew from Kathmandu to Bangkok to Yangon. In Bangkok, we were joined by a fourth member of our meditation group, Lee Olson. As the plane touched down in Yangon, a huge crowd of people were on the tarmac to receive their Sayadaw back to his homeland. As he walked off the plane, people threw white silk scarves on the ground in front of him. Afterwards, the women took

these scarves and held them with joy. We had never seen a homecoming such as this one. Our connection to Burma was strengthened by the joy and love of these people for Sitagu Sayadaw.

Our first week in Yangon was one of the busiest and most exciting that I have ever spent. Sayadaw and other revered monks were being given honorific awards from the Burmese Government. The ceremony took place at Kaba Aye pagoda in Yangon. Next to the pagoda was the Maha Pasana Guha Cave, a replica of the cave in India where the first Buddhist synod took place after the Buddha died. On the outside the building resembled a huge cave, and inside was a cavernous auditorium where many monks gathered for the awards ceremony. To prepare for a parade by the honorees and their followers around the Cave, the two American men were outfitted in beautiful pasos and wore traditional Burmese formal white jackets. On their heads were kaung baungs, traditional Burmese hats made of a silk-covered bamboo frame. We ladies were coiffed and had make-up applied by a hairdresser who came to the house we were staying in. We wore beautiful longyis and real jewels. The parade of the honored monks and their followers circled the Cave. Sayadaw led our group. We Americans were right behind him. We held huge sculpted metal bowls into which people placed donations of cash and small gifts. As soon as our bowls filled up, someone would take them and replace them with empty bowls. It seemed like we circled the Cave for hours. Lee Olson had a stomach

virus and looked green, but he persistently marched with only a few breaks. Then the award ceremony began. Sitagu Sayadaw received the award for great Dhamma teacher, the Mahadhammakathika Bahujanahitadhara Award. After only three days in Yangon, it felt like we had entered another world.

Sayadaw returned to Sagaing, which is in Middle Burma, across the Irrawaddy River from Mandalay. We went with him. This was his return to His Sitagu Vihara after being gone for nearly two years. It was our first visit there. By now there were only three of us Americans. Lee Olson had gone back to his job in the U.S. There were residences for guests, so we settled into our rooms and got acquainted with the monks. Life in a monastery is quiet and the same from day to day. The monks would go out on alms rounds before breakfast. They lined up by height with the elders in front and the youngest ones in the back of a perfect line. When breakfast was over, the monks swept the grounds of the monastery. The deciduous trees in Southeast Asia lose their leaves in the dry season on a daily basis and the leaves are quite hard and large. Sweeping leaves is a never-ending task that has to be done every day. Then, the young monks go off to school or study in their monastery. In Sagaing Hills, this means a walk up and down covered stone steps which connect each monastery among all the hillsides and above all is the big pagoda at the top of the hills called Pone Nya Shin. Sagaing dates back to the 14th Century A.D. There are ancient pagodas that are being archaeologically

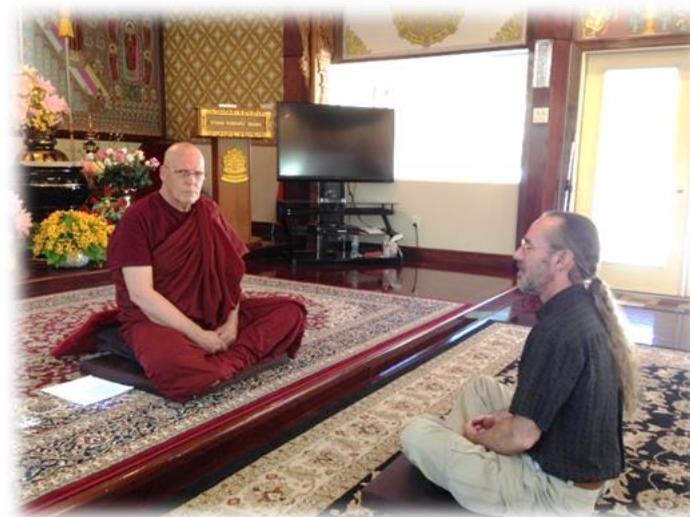
excavated beside new ones. Things change slowly but they do change in this land of tradition and holy ones. For instance, in the course of our visiting Burma for many years, the horse carts in Sagaing are quickly disappearing. Cars and motorbikes have replaced them. Sayadaw explained to us that Sagaing means bend in the river. The Irrawaddy flows south out of Mandalay, but turns west just at Sagaing, until it goes further and turns south again. During our many visits to Burma, we always feel like we are coming home when we cross the Irrawaddy and enter Sagaing Hills, the abode of Holy Recluses.

The way that Sitagu Sayadaw introduced us to Buddhism was quite profound. He offered us an invitation to share a plan he had thought out completely, organized, funded and made happen...his pilgrimage to Buddhist sites and return to Burma. It is his great determination, confidence and concentration that continue to inspire us and protect us. We have returned to Burma many times since the pilgrimage. Sayadaw has taken many monks and lay people to see the beloved shrines overseas. He has traveled constantly and he has done good deeds and acts of kindness for humanity. In support of his connection with people and his superb ability to organize and "do" good works for humanity and to continuously preach the Dhamma, we say, 'Saddhu, Saddhu, Saddhu'.

- Barbara Heilman -

A FORTUNATE HAPPENSTANCE, BY ALAN KNOX

I was raised in a Christian family but had great difficulty believing many of the concepts described in the Christian Bible. After taking a survey of world religions course in my first year of college, I realized that Buddhism made the most sense to me. I have been reading books on Buddhism since my late teens. As a



westerner, I often found some of the concepts described by the eastern authors very tedious and frequently difficult to understand, however, I persisted. For some 40 years, I continued to read books about Buddhism every so often but I never met another Buddhist. I had an irregular meditation practice. My understanding of what constituted a Buddhist practice was quite limited until I fortuitously found Sitagu Buddha Vihara.

I volunteer occasionally at the Wimberley, Texas library and one day I looked up and saw three Buddhist monks along with a patron of the library with whom I had become somewhat familiar. I noticed that one of the monks was a westerner. I immediately went and introduced myself and was introduced by Ashin Cintita to the other two (Burmese) monks. Bhante C told me about Sitagu Buddha Vihara and where it was located. The library friend who was accompanying the monks was Ms. Marianne Mitchell and she agreed to take me to the Vihara for a tour. I was amazed at the beauty of the buildings, the number of cottages, and the scope of the

library. We stayed for lunch and I was “hooked.”

Since then, I have been a regular attendee of Bhante C’s Foundations of Buddhism course and after completion, the Sutta Discussion Group that Bhante C facilitates. I now have a regular meditation practice and have taken the five precepts of a Buddhist. Finding Sitagu Buddha Vihara has changed my life. I began borrowing books from the Vihara’s library and now have started purchasing my own personal library. My understanding has increased in the past six months more than in the previous 40 years thanks to the guidance of Bhante C and the admirable friends that I have at the Vihara.

Additionally, I have met a number of Burmese Buddhists and am thoroughly enjoying getting to know them and more about their culture. I am most grateful to Bhante C, my western and Burmese admirable friends, and to the vision of Sayadaw Sitagu and what he has established in Austin, Texas.

- Alan Knox -

