

Forty-five Years of Buddhist Relief Mission

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In the early 1980s, we worked as supervisors and curriculum developers in government-funded English as a second language programs in three refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines. We noticed that in every camp, the offices of the relief agencies, the hospital, and the church were all clustered near the camp entrance. The Buddhist temples—and almost every camp had, at least one—were invariably far away, and seldom visited by any agency staff. A monk was regarded the same as any other refugee, and there was no consideration for his particular needs. Many of the relief organizations were Christian-based, and, while offering assistance to all the refugees, they were likely to give special attention to the churches and to any refugees closely connected to them. The monks, on the other hand, were completely dependent on the laity, other refugees, for their requisites. There was only one Buddhist organization—from a Japanese Buddhist sect—operating in the camps, but even that agency focused on sports and handicraft, without paying special attention to the temples or the monks.

We discussed this situation with friends and several influential Buddhists, but no one was interested. We even wrote an article for the *Journal of World Fellowship of Buddhists*, pointing out the need for a Buddhist welfare organization to offer relief to monks and temples in refugee camps, but there was no response. One day, as we were riding in a tuk-tuk in Bangkok, we were talking about this and declared, “We’ll have to start an organization ourselves!” Thus, was Buddhist Relief Mission born.

After we finished our work in the camp in the Philippines, we were hired to teach English at Seifu Gakuen, a private Buddhist high school in Osaka, Japan, where we had generous vacations of four months every year. Taking advantage of this, we returned to Thailand every summer. We wanted to spend time with friends in Bangkok, both Thai and foreign agency staff members. We also wanted to go to some of the refugee camps to see our Hmong refugee friends who were still there and to offer support to the temples and monks. When we explained the goals of Buddhist Relief Mission, our friends helped us get into the camps, even the Cambodian camps on the Thai/Cambodian border where we had never worked.

We had told friends and colleagues in Japan that we were going back to Thailand in the summer, and many of them made donations to Buddhist Relief Mission, asking us to share merit with them because they could not go themselves. Our donations were very small at first—such as Buddha images, robes, incense, over-the-counter medicines, and non-perishable food items—but it was very gratifying. Most of the monks and lay refugees in the temples told us that, except for a few Thais, no organization staff members ever visited the temples, and none had made any donations. In one camp, we met Ven. Kim Cang, a young Khmer Krom monk who had completed his English studies and was scheduled to leave soon for the United States. We suggested that, after he arrived, he contact Ven. Dhammasiri, the Abbot of Washington Buddhist Vihara, the Sri Lankan temple in Washington, D.C. We had visited that monastery several times and knew the chief monk personally. Grateful for the advice, Ven. Kim Cang did so, and he was able to stay at the Vihara. Ven. Dhammasiri greatly assisted him in resettling in the United States, and they have remained good friends. We also kept in touch with Ven. Kim Cang. On our trips back to the United States, we visited his temple in Virginia, and donated as much as we could. After struggling in the early years, his monastery is now thriving with a great number of

members, both Khmer and Vietnamese refugee families and devoted American devotees. He visited us in Japan, and we met him in Thailand one summer and accompanied him to several Burmese refugee camps. He also visited us in Michigan, and we took him to the Burmese monastery in Toronto, Canada.

In one of the Cambodian camps we met an elderly refugee who had been a monk in Cambodia, but had been forced to disrobe by the Khmer Rouge. Somehow, he had managed to survive and escape to Thailand. He was teaching meditation in the camp, but he did not want to reordain. His students were mostly elderly women who had lost their families in the Cambodian genocide under the Khmer Rouge. Many of them had adopted the little children who had lost their parents. This center was the most peaceful place we had ever been in. Through meditation, these refugees had been able to overcome the trauma they had suffered. Though the conditions in the camp were extremely basic, their faces were radiant. It was a joy for us to be able to make a small donation to support them in their meditation practice.

One summer, in a Lao camp, we learned that about fifteen of the monks would be leaving soon for resettlement in the United States. They fervently wanted to pay homage at That Phnom, a sacred chedi on the Thai/Lao border, a few miles from the camp, but they were not able to go by themselves. We hired a bus, and the next morning, the monks quietly left the camp one by one and walked to the bus. After they had all arrived, we left for the stupa. As soon as we arrived, the monks hurried off the bus and disappeared. We wondered where they had gone. A few minutes later, we found them. They had found vendors with little birds to be released from cages. Having been confined for several years in the camp, they were, at last being set free, and they wanted to share their happiness by releasing these caged songbirds. It was a beautiful sight!

We first visited Burma in 1979, and, in one short week, we had fallen in love with the country, but, at that time, we did not know that we were Buddhist. We had a dream of finding work with a relief organization in Burma, but accepted the jobs in the refugee camps, instead. In 1982, after we had completed our work in the camps, before returning to Japan, we made another one-week trip to Burma. One day, while we were getting up from meditation at Sule Pagoda, a security guard stepped up and asked us to accompany him to the pagoda office. There, we were greeted by an elderly gentlemant, U Khin Zaw, the chief trustee of the pagoda committee. He said that he had noticed us meditating several times and wondered who we were. We explained a little about ourselves, and he was very interested. He told us about the pagoda and invited us to attend dana for the senior patron sayadaws the next day. That was a wonderful experience! Knowing that we would be visiting Rangoon again on our way back from India, we asked U Khin Zaw whether there was anything we could bring. "Actually," he replied, "we need halogen lamps for illuminating the pagoda at night. They are very difficult to find in Burma, and even when we can, they are very expensive." We promised to try to help. Sure enough, in Calcutta, at a shop called Murli Electric, we were found exactly what he wanted and bought several. U Kin Zaw was extremely grateful for the donation. He introduced us to one of his friends, U Ko Ko, one of only two certified public accountants in the country at that time. U Ko Ko, as part of his dana to the Sangha, audited the committee accounts of many of the monasteries throughout the country. For the next five years, we visited Burma every summer at least once, and spent much of the time with these dear friends. They introduced us to many respected Sayadaws, and U Ko Ko took us to many important monasteries. Without their help and guidance, we would never have learned so much about Buddhism in Burma.

U Ko Ko and U Khin Zaw also took us to several Sangha hospitals in Burma, and we learned of the shortage of medicine and medical equipment. We mentioned this to Dr. Oba, an orthopedic surgeon we knew at the Red Cross Hospital in Osaka. He wanted to help and had a brilliant idea. He discussed this with other physicians and placed a box near the operating theater at the hospital. Surgeons dropped into the box all the stainless steel instruments, such as scalpels, forceps, and retractors, which they no longer needed, but were still perfectly usable. Dr. Oba donated them to us for the Sangha hospitals. Each summer, we carried about twenty pounds of these instruments into Burma. Fortunately, this was before all the flight restrictions which were imposed after 9-11, and we were able pack everything in our carry-on luggage, which was never weighed.

Some friends in Bangkok were highly supportive of our Buddhist Relief, and introduced us to the Thai Government Pharmaceutical Organization, where we were able to buy large quantities of essential medicines, which we also carried into Burma and donated to the Sangha.

As more people learned about Buddhist Relief Mission, donations increased, and we were able to do much more. The headmaster of our school was very familiar with several of the important temples in Nara, the ancient capital of Japan. With his introduction, we visited the temples and explained to the Abbots our relief work in Thailand. To our great surprise several of the temples made large contributions.

In August 1986, after six weeks of meditation at the Mahasi Center in Rangoon, we attended the opening of the State Pariyatti Sasana University of Mandalay, founded by Mingun Tipitaka Viccitta Sayadaw and were offered positions as English teachers. We seriously considered this, but, unfortunately, in 1988, because of the uprising, we realized that it was impossible.

One afternoon, in a discussion with the student monks at the university, we mentioned our visits to the Cambodian camps and the plight of the monks there. The students were very sympathetic and mentioned that they greatly admired the Cambodian monks from what they had heard of their participation and contribution to the Sixth Buddhist Council in Rangoon in 1956. The next day, as we were getting ready to leave, the students gave us a bag of robes, slippers, and traditional umbrellas which they collected, and they asked us to donate them to the Cambodian monks. We carried all of this back to Bangkok along with some arahat relics which U Ko Ko had given us and turned it over to UNHCR. A few months later, we received beautiful photos of a ceremony in which the dana from the Burmese monks was given to the Cambodian monks and of the stupa in which the relics had been enshrined. We sent copies of the photos to the Burmese monks, and they were also very pleased.

Before we left Bangkok in 1986, we submitted documents from the Mahasi Center to the Burmese Embassy and applied for meditation visas for the next summer. When we went to the Embassy in 1987, we were informed that, since we had told them that we wanted the visas in July, they not sent the applications to Rangoon until February, and they had not yet been approved. We were very disappointed, but we decided that, since we could not meditate in Rangoon, we would make two one-week trips to Burma on tourist visas. Actually, the advantage of this was that we could carry twice as many donations to the Sangha hospitals, so we were quite busy in Bangkok, medicine and other supplies.

Shortly after we returned to Japan, we received a letter from the Embassy informing us that our visas were ready and that we should pick them up within one month. We immediately wrote

back and explained again that we could use those visas only during our vacation, and we asked the Embassy to hold them until July 1988.

In 1988, Burma was, as Asiaweek magazine put it, “boiling over.” There were massive demonstrations calling for democracy and protesting against the government of Gen. Ne Win. Some students had been killed by the army, hundreds had been arrested, and the situation was chaotic. In July, when we arrived at the Burmese Embassy, the lobby was full of journalists, clamoring for visas to get to Rangoon, but being refused. We stepped up to the counter and showed the receptionist the letter we had sent in September. Within twenty minutes our passports were stamped with three-month meditation visas. The journalists were astonished. “How did you do that?!” they asked. We just smiled and walked away.

We arrived in Rangoon the day after Ne Win resigned and watched him deliver his speech on TV at the Strand Hotel. The next day, we entered the Mahasi Meditation Center, which was unaffected by the uproar, but we could hear the demonstrations every day. We had planned to meditate until the end of August, but after only a few days, we received news that the father of a dear friend had been killed in an accident in Mandalay. Ven. U Pandita Sayadaw granted us permission to leave, and we took the train to Mandalay, where we stayed at the guesthouse of the Sasana University and learned a lot about the protests, which were occurring every day. On Ken’s birthday, August 12, U Ko Ko arranged for us to borrow Mingun Sayadaw’s boat to sail to Sagaing, where we visited the hospitals of both Ven. Lakkhana, who had been one of our teachers at Mahasi, and Ven. Nyanissara, Sitagu Sayadaw, whom we had first met two years before. In Sagaing, we learned that on August 9th, one day after the nationwide strike, in response to a peaceful demonstration of workers and students in their green longyis, the army, having laid a trap, suddenly opened fire and killed many people. Bodies had been thrown down wells and into the Irrawaddy River. We heard graphic details and took careful notes.

On the return to Mandalay, we visited a monastery on an island in the middle of the Irrawaddy, where a monk had an orphanage for young boys whose parents had been killed in the fighting in Shan State. We made a donation, and promised to collect clothes in Japan for the boys.

The next day, the American Embassy contacted us and advised us to leave Burma as soon as possible. We flew to Rangoon and left for Thailand a few days before Aung San Suu Kyi gave her famous speech. Immediately after we arrived in Bangkok, we contacted the journalist Bertil Lintner, who had, for several months, been reporting on the democracy movement in Burma. We told him what we had learned about the massacre in Sagaing, and he was very pleased because there was so little news of events outside Rangoon. The next day, the incident was reported on the front page of *The Bangkok Post*, and, later, Bertil in his book, *Outrage*, covering the 1988 uprising, credited us, albeit anonymously, with the revelation.

Also in Bangkok, we met Daw Aye Aye Thant, daughter of the former UN Secretary-General, and learned of her relief efforts using diplomatic channels. We donated and much as we could and resolved to do more.

Back in Japan, we immediately launched a campaign to raise money for relief inside Burma and for the students, monks, and other refugees who had fled to the Thai/Burma border. First, we worked only as Buddhist Relief Mission, but soon we established Burmese Relief Center–Japan, which supported various programs, education and medical, of the All Burma Student Democratic Front and other refugee groups, and Buddhist Relief Mission assisted the refugee monks all along

the border. In the Karen Liberated Area, BRM was the primary donor for the erection of a beautiful chedi on the Salween River, and, in Shan State, we funded the construction of a monastery for a community of Pa'O. We sent regular donations to the refugee monks of All Burma Young Monks' Union and frequently visited their monasteries.

Each year, our teacher, Ven. U Khe Min Da, whom we mentioned yesterday, gave us robes to donate to the refugee monks, and several monks we knew in Bangkok donated excess dana they had received. Whenever we left Bangkok for the camps, our van was filled with donated supplies.

In the 1990s Buddhist Relief Mission completed three remarkable printing projects of the Dhammapada. First, the Lao refugee monks told us that, in the 70s, the Sasana Ministry had begun translating the Tipitaka into Lao. The Ministry had completed the translation of only the Dhammapada when the Government of Laos fell to the Communists in 1975. The monks very much wanted to have this book, but no copies were available. We happened to find one in the library of World Fellowship of Buddhists in Bangkok. We took it to a printer in Bangkok and arranged to print 1000 copies with a photo of the beautiful Phra That Phanom Chedi on the Mekong where the Lao monks had released the birds. We delivered the copies to a Lao bhikkhu in Bangkok, who arranged to send them to Lao monks in Thailand and to monasteries and temples in Laos.

The next year, a Mon refugee on the Thai/Burma border showed us a slightly worm-eaten copy of the Dhammapada in Mon, which had been printed many years before and was no longer available. He asked whether we could print new copies. We promised to try. We found a printer who was able to repair the damage before printing 1000 copies. For the cover of this volume, we chose a photo we had taken of Phra That Pathom, the tallest Buddhist structure in the world, which is an ancient Mon pagoda, located in Nakorn Pathom, Thailand. With the family of Visakha's Bangkok dressmaker, our dear Buddhist friends in Thailand, we delivered these copies to Ven. Uttamo, the respected Mon monk in Sangkhlaburi, right on the Burma border.

Third, we had received a copy of the Dhammapada in Khmer, which a refugee in United States had translated and printed for distribution to Cambodian monasteries there. We wrote to him, received permission, and printed 1000 copies, which we were able to send into Cambodia. We later learned that this was the first Buddhist book distributed in Cambodia after the fall of the Khmer Rouge.

Another significant printing project was a large poster of the Wheel of Life, supported by a fierce Naga, a design created by a Burmese refugee student with an explanation of Paticca Samuppada in Burmese. Two thousand copies of this striking poster were distributed free all along the Thai/Burma border and worldwide. It was first printed in Bangkok in 1994, and again in Flint, Michigan, in 2000.

Over the years, Buddhist Relief Mission has received requests for assistance from many different individuals and institutions who have heard about our work. Of course, it has been impossible to accept all of them, but we have accommodated as many as possible. We try never to say, "No," even though we may not be able to offer as much as requested. This was an important lesson from our great teacher, Ven. U Khe Min Da. We have funded projects, such as a home for elders in Kathmandu, Nepal, and an orphanage and school in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

In 1994, we received a modest request from two monks from Rakhine State, who were studying for their PhD at Nalanda Institute in BodhGaya. They wanted to establish a free clinic to distribute basic medicine to poor people in that area. We were pleased to offer them a little assistance, and, for several years, we maintained correspondence with them. In 2000, after we had left Japan and moved to Flint to care for Visakha's mother, we received a letter from one of those monks, Ven. NandoBatha, who had received his degree and had moved to Calcutta and established a monastery called Bodhisukha. He had a plan to add a school to the monastery and asked whether Buddhist Relief Mission could help. When Visakha's mother, a retired librarian, heard about this, she exclaimed, "I remember reading the book, *City of Joy*, about Calcutta, and I have always wanted to go there. At 87, I can't do that, but bring me my checkbook!" She immediately wrote a check for ten thousand dollars, handed it to us, and said, "Please send this to that monk so that he can start his school." Thus, Sara Decker became a founder/donor of Bodhisukha School, which has greatly expanded in its 25 years and has gained an excellent reputation in Barasat, a northern suburb of Kolkata, near the border with Bangladesh.

We first visited Bodhisukha in the spring of 2001, shortly after Visakha's mother passed away, on our way to Bangalore for the 80th birthday celebration of Ven. Achariya Buddharakkhita. In December 2001, we went to Bodhisukha again to begin the first Buddhist Relief Mission pilgrimage to the sacred Buddhist sites, with Ven. NandoBatha and Ven. Pannasila, whom we had met in Bangalore. Ven. Pannasilal was very learned Dalit bhikkhu and had, for two years, served as Secretary of the MahaBodhi Vihara Committee in BodhGaya. That two-week pilgrimage with the two monks, our friend Bruce from Japan, and our guide and tour organizer Rajiv, was a truly inspiring experience. We meditated at each site, learned a great deal about Buddhism in India and the Dalit movement, and met many other monks, Burmese, Indian, and Sri Lankan. Since then, we have repeated the pilgrimage three times with different groups, and each pilgrimage has been enriching and rewarding. These pilgrimages inspired us to create another book, *A Pilgrim's Companion: Readings from Buddhist Texts to Enhance a Pilgrimage to the Sacred Sites*. We first published this book ourselves in 2012, and Buddhist Cultural Centre published the second edition this year.

From 1999 to 2005, We lived in Flint, Michigan, and, as Visakha explained yesterday, at almost the same time as we arrived, Dr. Kyaw Thet Oo, his family, and several of his handicapped patients also arrived in Flint as refugees. In cooperation with the Unitarian Church in Flint, we had arranged their resettlement, but we had never imagined that we would be there with them. It so happened that we had to take sudden early retirement from our teaching positions in Japan to return and care for Visakha's mother, who could no longer live alone. In that we were Buddhists, it was auspicious to be with the doctor's family. We were the only Buddhists in Flint, and we were stronger together.

Buddhist Relief Mission became much stronger. We joined the Flint Interfaith Council along with representatives of several Christian sects, a Jewish rabbi, a member of the Baha'i, and a woman from the Ojibwe Nation. Most of the others had rarely interacted with Buddhists, but they were very interested in our perspective and opinions.

Almost every Sunday, we drove with the doctor's family to one of the Buddhist temples in lower Michigan, always taking some food to serve the monks, and to share with other devotees in a potluck lunch afterward. Sometimes we went to the Thai monastery near Lansing which had

been established by an American monk. Sometimes to the Lao monastery of the elderly Ven. Sinuone or to the Midwest monastery which the chief monk, Ajahn Cheun, refused to call “Thai,” both in Detroit. And sometimes to the Great Lakes Vihara, the Sri Lankan monastery near Detroit. There was also a Bangladeshi monk, Ven. Dhammananda, staying in Detroit, and we met him often.

One of the highlights of our time in Flint was pindapata. Each summer, from 2002 to 2004, on a warm summer Sunday, we invited the monks from all of these temples to come to our neighborhood, the cultural center of Flint, to walk for alms. We informed the neighbors about the event and explained the custom. Ken led the procession striking a brass gong to announce the monks’ arrival, and many came out to offer food. Some encouraged their children to place the food in the monks’ bowls. Everyone felt very gratified. It was truly an inspiring experience. It was also featured in the local newspaper and appeared on the evening TV news.

In 2001, we had learned that there were Cambodian monks studying in Colombo, so, when we arrived in Sri Lanka, we contacted them. We invited them and their Shan monk friends to accompany us on a tour of the sites in the Cultural Triangle—Dambulla, the beautifully painted caves; Aukana, the massive standing Buddha stone statue; Anuradhapura, the ancient capital of the kingdom, where Buddhism first arrived; Polonnaruwa, the lovely medieval capital; and Sigiriya, the imposing rock fortress crowned with enigmatic ruins. The tour began in Kandy, the last royal capital, and we arranged to meet Bhikkhu Bodhi, the editor and President of Buddhist Publication Society, at the Forest Hermitage, where he was staying. The foreign monks were as delighted as we were to meet this respected senior bhikkhu.

We met him a second time later that year in Bangalore at Ajahn Buddharakkhita’s birthday celebration, which we mentioned earlier. Without informing us beforehand, the organizers of the event had assigned us the responsibility of taking care of the three special guest bhikkhus. Like everything in India, that was a challenge, but it was extremely enjoyable because we were able to spend a lot of time with Bhikkhu Bodhi and the other monks, and we learned a great deal.

Before going to Bangalore, Bhikkhu Bodhi had resigned as editor of BPS, and, after Bangalore, he took up residence at a Chinese monastery in New Jersey. Eager to meet him again, we drove there from Michigan and meditated at the monastery for several days. We had heard about the severe headache with which Bhikkhu Bodhi had suffered incessantly for more than 25 years. We asked him about it, and he told us that he had sought various treatments in several countries, but none of them had been successful. We mentioned a headache clinic in Ann Arbor, and asked whether he would come to Michigan for treatment there. He agreed, and we made all the arrangements. A few weeks later, he came to Flint, and we drove him to the clinic, where he stayed for about a week. The doctors were not able to cure the headache, but they taught him some exercises to help him bear the pain, and he reported that one of the benefits of his stay there was that he met quite a few patients whose pain was much greater than his, and that he realized that they had to function in jobs much more demanding than his. In spite of the continuing headache, he has made invaluable contributions to Buddhist scholarship, including several translations of portions of the Tipitaka. We are fortunate to have kept in close communication with him.

In 2004, with President Bush waging war in Iraq, which we strongly opposed by joining Michigan Citizens for Peace in regular weekly demonstrations with signs proclaiming “Buddhists

Against War!” and finding America too expensive for our limited financial resources, we decided to leave. We looked at the obviously Buddhist countries and felt that Sri Lanka was the most suitable for us. Also, as we mentioned yesterday, by going into complete retirement, we would have time to finish the Jatakas. Thus, in 2005, we moved to Kandy. What we thought was retirement, however, was the beginning of active directorship of Buddhist Relief Mission.

Our sponsor, Ven. Dhammawasa, abbot of Subodharama in Peradeniya, near Kandy, and one of the most respected monks in Sri Lanka, asked us to teach monks and novices at his monastery. Shortly thereafter, the abbot of Vajirarama, a temple near our house, also asked us to teach. We continued teaching weekly classes at these two monasteries until the Covid pandemic. The class at Subodharama morphed into a class of foreign monks and nuns, both Theravada and Mahayana, studying at Peradeniya University. That was very interesting, and the discussions were often quite challenging for both the students and us.

As we were teaching these classes, we developed a textbook, *Merit, An ESL Buddhist English Course*. The theme of the textbook is a pilgrimage to the sacred sites. Three men—a Thai medical student, a Japanese economics student, and an American professor of religion—and three women—an architect who is the wife of the professor, a French philosophy student, and a British artist—register in Bangkok for a pilgrimage, which begins in Kolkata at Bodhicitta Monastery, modeled, of course, on Bodhisukha. The group is led by Rajiv, in reality, our guide and dear friend, and Ven. Panna, modeled on the Dalit monk, Ven. Pannasila. The lessons describe their experiences in the places they visit on a fifteen-day pilgrimage and include topics such as Paticca Sammutapada, novice ordination, and meditation. The aim of the course is to introduce the English vocabulary for the Buddhist concepts with which monks are very familiar in Pali and their own language and to present them with good examples of the language structure they need to teach those concepts in English.

On our way to Sri Lanka, in 2005, we had made another visit to Bodhisukha and Ven. NandoBatha, emphasizing that Sri Lanka was so close to India, had urged us to conduct an English course at Bodhisukha for Burmese monks studying at Indian universities, mainly in Bihar. We couldn’t refuse, and the first Intensive Buddhist English Course was held in Kolkata in March-April 2006. There were about 30 students, one of whom was Ven. Pannasila, the Dalit monk from Maharashtra. We were the only teachers. We held classes four hours every day for one month. It was an exhilarating experience. It was so successful that we repeated the course seven more times, but, for all the others, we were not the only teachers. Through our website and periodic reports from Sri Lanka, we invited teachers to join and received responses from around the world. About ten teachers voluntarily joined the program, some, several times. With more teachers, we were able to increase classtime to 5 or 6 hours a day.

In 2007, several Burmese monks who were studying with us in Kandy asked us to organize a similar intensive course for other Burmese monks studying in Sri Lanka, of which there are as many as two hundred, mostly in Colombo. Thus, in 2008, we held our first Kandy Intensive Buddhist English Course, which included Burmese, Chinese, Bhutanese, Vietnamese, and Korean monks and nuns. For these courses, also, the primary text was our textbook, *Merit*. The Kandy Intensives were held almost every year after that until the Covid pandemic, and they were also very successful and demanding. One of the remarkable features of these courses was that our housekeeper organized a team to prepare lunch every day for the thirty or forty students, and

derived great joy from the meritorious work. Of course, none of the courses, neither in India nor in Sri Lanka, would have been possible if we had not received generous donations from supporters around the world.

News of the Intensive Course spread, and, in 2016, we were asked to conduct a course for more than one hundred samaneras at MahaBodhi Society in Bangalore, the monastery established by Achariya Buddharakkhita, where we had attended his birthday celebration, fifteen years before. Of course, we agreed, and the one month course was held in December, followed almost immediately by the course in Kolkata.

For several years, we provided a great deal of assistance to a monastery in Sri Lanka where a monk, in addition to housing novices, was caring for about twenty elderly monks. We visited his monastery frequently, and supported many of his projects to improve the temple facilities.

A few years ago, we had a very satisfying experience at the Sangha ward of Kandy National Hospital. We learned that the ward, the original bungalow of the former tea estate on which the hospital is located, sits on a knoll. The entrance is at the top of a stone staircase which had no railing. Of course, many elderly monks were treated there, and climbing the stairs was a dangerous challenge. We arranged for our handyman to install a sturdy iron railing, and Buddhist Relief Mission paid for cost of labor and materials. One day, when we went to examine the work, the hospital staff showed us the impressive elevator in the ward. It was large enough for a hospital bed, but it was not run by electricity. Instead, it was operated manually, by pulling a heavy rope, which was connected to an enormous wheel which could be seen as the carriage rose and fell. We noticed that the rope they were using was quite frayed. The staff admitted that it had been used for many years and needed to be replaced, but there were no funds to cover it. We offered to help and asked our handyman to find suitable rope. When he had finished the railing, he traveled to Colombo in search of the rope. Several merchants offered his strong nylon rope which they assured him would last a long time. We insisted, however, on natural hemp, the same as has been used for centuries on ships. With perseverance, he found the perfect one-inch rope, and we bought the proper length. Happily, the elevator is running smoothly once again.

Buddhist Relief Mission has always been concerned with the plight of refugees, and that concern has continued with the Rohingya genocide in Arakan State. We have closely followed the situation, mainly in the refugee camps in Bangladesh, the largest with more than one million refugees. The Rohingya are Muslims fleeing genocide in Rakhine State in Burma. We feel they deserve our support and respect, partly in that their persecution is being perpetrated by those who call themselves Buddhist. We have sent as much as we can to groups in the camps for medical needs, food for the orphans, education, and water projects. Recently, we became acquainted with a group of more than one hundred Rohingya refugees struggling to survive in Sri Lanka and are assisting them as best we can.

Since 2022, Buddhist Relief Mission has been providing food and medical assistance to poor families suffering from the economic crisis here in Sri Lanka. We send out regular flyers describing the needs and appealing for funds. The response has been overwhelming, with several people making monthly donations. We have been able to provide thousand of parcels of dry rations to destitute families, as well as food and medicine to needy institutions such as monasteries, schools, and orphanages. It is a great joy to see the gratitude of all the recipients.

Let us conclude by expressing our view that Buddhist Relief Mission is not and has never been a formal organization with a large office, a paid staff, and a budget with huge overhead expenses. 100 per cent of the donations we receive is distributed as they are intended. We do not receive any salary. In 2000, as soon as we were able, we registered BRM with the Internal Revenue Service in the United States so that our American donors could declare tax exemption, but that is a formality. Buddhist Relief Mission is, in reality, an extension of our way of life. We are extremely grateful to the thousands of donors and supporters around the world who have enabled us for forty-five years to carry out the activities, not only the projects we have mentioned, but many others, that seem so natural to us as concerned global citizens, and we find great happiness in sharing merit with them.

May you and all those dear to you be well, peaceful, and happy by the power of the Precious Triple Gem and of your own noble thoughts, words, and deeds.

Thank you very much.