

OVERCOMING SHADOWS

A THANK YOU NOTE

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EDITOR'S REMARK

This book contains stories and articles written by women from Burma participating in a project to aid the process of building peace in their home country. In particular, the volume arose from a training held in February 2003, entitled "Building Inner Peace." This was the second training of the project, with the first five week training held in March 2002. In the six months following the training, the participants returned to their communities to conduct workshops in different countries, including Bangladesh, China, India and Thailand.

The training programs are the implementation of a decision made by Women's League of Burma (WLB) at their first conference in December 2000 to prioritize the peace building process. The WLB is trying to contribute to genuine peace by broadening the peace process in Burma, beyond the cease-fire agreements between the armed opposition groups and the military regime. The goal of the WLB is to contribute to a genuine peace, where all are free, from all forms violence. There can only be genuine peace when women are free from domestic and sexual violence in the home and wider community.

The second training took place as the training participants wanted to share their experiences and to deepen their expertise in peace building techniques and strengthen their understanding of gender issues. The organizers themselves believe that an understanding of the nature of violence against women and techniques to improve personal development will strengthen women, enabling them to better deal with some of the obstacles they encounter in their work for peace.

This book is part of the breaking of the culture of silence around sexual abuse and discrimination in the different communities in Burma. It is not a chronicle of abuse. If anyone is interested in violations, then one only has to read the myriad of reports on human rights violations for a taste of the systematic violations of the rights of both women and men in Burma. Rather, this book reflects the attempts of 16 women to understand the particular forms of injustice women experience.

Although, men and women suffer extreme oppression in our society, I can now clearly recognize discrimination against women.

It is not a chronicle of shame, but a sign that women from Burma are looking outwards to build a different future, where both men and women will have greater freedom in both their personal and political lives. This book reflects the very painful process of social change amongst some of the people of Burma. The book points to people who are learning to assess their own communities, their own attitudes of themselves and other women in their respective communities. These stories and articles are a sign that women have the right to experience a different world and they have a part in making a different possibility for all. It reflects a realization that both men and women are not slaves to custom and tradition – that these are not immutable, but that everyone has a role in shaping and striving for a better world, where violence against women and others is not a part of daily life. These are stories not just of thoughts, but of action. They are stories of women trying to build an improved world, where the hope of human progress still lives.

Each generation has been taught that our customs and traditions are something that must be preserved. We are not encouraged or allowed to assess or analyse the suitability of our traditions. We are only expected to practice and preserve. Some of us know that not all our customary practices are suitable or acceptable, though we continue to act in the traditional manner. We never think about resisting or questioning, rather we hold on to bad customs, fearing lose of culture.

Some of the stories highlight, the power of family, lovers and friends who support and encourage women to speak and not feel shame for the violations they have experienced.

Fortunately, I was able to open my heavy heart to my lover. I trusted him and he gave me much comfort. Although, not brave enough to reveal the truth publicly, I was able to tell my family and friends, with my lover's encouragement and support. I expected to hear words of blame and receive accusatory looks. Instead, there was reassurance and support from all of them. I was able to trust, as they offered me complete understanding and listened to everything I said.

Some of these women, their families, lovers and friends are brave enough to confront men in powerful positions in armed groups. However, many are not so courageous. It is to both these groups that the stories speak. It addresses those women and men, who already have courage and asks them to maintain their bravery. It also addresses those who are yet to find the courage to stand against violence, oppression and discrimination.

Most of the people reading the English version of this book will not be surprised that discrimination against women, rape, sexual assault and sexual intimidation are all too common in Burma. These problems are not the problems of anyone society. Some of the readers of the Burmese version of the book may be unhappy with the some of the stories and articles when they confront ideas and events they do not wish to accept. This will not be the first cultural group to find that discussion of sexual abuse and discrimination unpalatable. However, some readers of the English version of the book will also have to confront their own cultural insularity and ignorance. Some readers may not understand the degree of difficulty faced by these women in critiquing their own society and the problems that encourage, enhance and make the struggle for change extremely difficult.

My life has not been happy, as it was not possible for me to obtain what I most wanted – education. The government did not build a school in our village, as fighting and battles occurred very often in our area. To attend school we had to travel to the nearest town. My parents could not afford to send us to the schools in town, having only enough to survive each day. My father was frequently recruited as a porter for the army, so could not support our family. Many other people in my village did not have the chance to study for the same reasons. Many people died unnecessarily from illness and disease as there was no clinic in our village. We were unable to the hospital in the town, as the journey was dangerous and the road was often impassable. Six of my family died and I faced death from malaria.

It is evident from some of the stories, that some of the women have undergone the difficult and painful process of self assessment. Also, many of the stories show that these women are strong enough to assess their role in their own oppression and those of other women.

At the time, I was angry at the young woman, because she had been arrested for suspicious behaviour. This made it impossible for me to have any consideration for her. I looked down on her and blamed her for what happened. Since, she had been arrested by an allied group and as it did not happen to me, I thought I had nothing to worry about. After all, I was considered a 'good woman'.

The problems for people trying to encourage social criticism and work for an improvement in people's opportunities is compounded by more than fifty years of civil war and militarism. Making a new world is never without enormous difficulties, but the complications that arise in societies poisoned by militarism, war and poverty only enhance the problems. The stories and articles show some of the problems women can face in war torn societies, where open discussion is not tolerated. The impact of war and militarism on the capacity of the individual to fully develop their human potential should not be under-estimated. The extent that people can develop their understanding of their environment is dependent upon their capacity to engage in open discussion. When people are ruled by those who actively discourage and punish those who speak out, all of us should not be surprised to find that speaking openly is a very confronting and painful person process. Oppressive governments do not just take away, freedom of movement, free and fair trials, property rights and rights to your own labour. One of the primary functions is to destroy the 'soul' of people and to remove their capacity to think and speak freely. We all should cherish and celebrate the women in this book who are courageous enough to question and to air their experiences and criticisms. They are a testimony to that part of humanity that strives for personal freedom.

This book that came from a training designed to help women, some of whom have grown up in refugee camps and live in exile after fleeing war and a military regime to live with their experiences of discrimination and violence. Violence and discrimination can wreak destruction on the human spirit and the training was designed to assist women to understand these experiences and to provide them with simple techniques for coping with their environments. These stories and articles result from the women reflecting on their own experiences in the light of new ideas. Some readers Burmese and outsiders may disagree with some of the ideas expressed in the book and find the techniques used by the trainers to "build inner peace" unfamiliar. The women do not ask you to agree, they only ask you to listen to their experiences with compassion and to consider seriously the critiques they offer of their own society.





WORDS FROM OUR HEARTS



Training Period in Mae Rim Village

We all felt uncertain upon our arrival about the village of Mae Rim, where we were to attend the second 'Women as Peace Builders' training, but we were happy to again meet friends, who we had not seen for one and a half years. We were all saddened to learn that five participants from the previous training were unable to attend.

The first training had been held in a house with a large garden, surrounded by a high fence in a quite neighbourhood in the Chiang Mai area. This had made us feel safe. However, the second training was held in a center, not surrounded by a fence, open to all. Regardless, we were assured that we were in a safe place. The people in the village were very friendly and did not disturb our training. We also tried very hard not to disturb anyone in the village. Paddy fields surrounded the training centre and there was a mountain range and other scenery in the distance. The village was very green. Unlike the previous training, we could walk in the evening after the training sessions and breathe the valuable fresh air.

In the morning, we would be greeted by the voices of singing birds. They woke those participants who were not early risers with their beautiful songs. Some scorpions and snakes gave us a visit or two during the rain. The noises of the frogs sounded as if they were asking us whether we were happy to be in Mae Rim. It was a place of freedom and a place that gave us happiness and peace of mind.

Sisters from Mae Rim village who did the catering, tried their very best to give us a variety of tastes and were very kind. We had fresh vegetables every day.¹ In the evening for fun, some of the participants went out into the field and caught small crabs to fry and eat. We reminisced about our lives in the towns and villages in Burma. And it was fun.

Villagers in Mae Rim were very friendly and seemed to be preserving their village customs. It is a village worth emulating. We all missed Mae Rim and the places we had visited outside of the village, when we returned to our homes after the training. We consider Mae Rim a place where our minds and thoughts were transformed.

Thoo Lay Boe



¹ This is unusual for some of the participants, if they are from the refugee camps where fresh vegetables are a luxury.

In My Heart (*Yin Twin Phyt*)

I would like to be happy, speak my mind and be free. I don't fully understand, but I only want to be friends with people who are caring, friendly and considerate. Maybe it is because of experiences in my life. I had wanted to draw a curtain on my past, filled with '*naint par mhu*.'² I felt incomplete, depressed and was without self respect. I wanted to have peace from a past filled only with worries. When I was young, I did not feel any peace. I was drowned by a world of pretences. I tried to attain inner peace and some space within, but to no avail. I was disheartened and had lost my dreams and desires. I knew I must work hard to change these feelings and that there was no changing the past and no point floating in a cycle of despair for the rest of my life. So I tried to change my life to fit in with everybody else.

However, there will be no improvement or growth in a life, if one fears change or transformation. For life to improve and develop, physical, intellectual and spiritual growth is needed. Only then can a person build peace within. Improvement and growth can lead to happiness that will bring peace. A person without growth will not be able to build peace for oneself, let alone for others. Though, if one is taken over by pretence, envy, and pride, there will be no personal growth and then no peace. I have to try harder not to be ruled by pretence, envy and pride. In reality it is not easy to change as people usually fit quite comfortably into their old belief system. It is hard even for those who claim they know and understand otherwise.

After the experiences of my life, I had such low self-esteem that I had come to accept discrimination as natural. Low self-esteem was part of my life and my habit. My father passed away when I was barely 2 year old. It was only much later when I really learned about him. I did not know what it was like to have a father and was unable to imagine fatherly love. I had never known the kind of love a father can give and did not know how to love a father. Nonetheless, I sometimes wished and imagined this love.

Despite longing for a father, he was my humiliation. My mother was his second wife and we had to live in the same house as his first wife. I had overheard my mother telling her friends about how she had to marry my father, whom she did not love. After the death of my father, my mother endured mental anguish living as the second wife of a dead husband. When I was 5 or 6 years old we finally left, when she could no longer cope. All she gained from marrying my father was six children and the impossible task of bringing them up on her own. She did not marry again.

Everyone can probably imagine how we felt in those days. My mother single handedly did her best to bring us up and tried to endure the criticism of others. Our mother was treated disrespectfully by some men and bad-mouthed by some women. I could not imagine how they could do this to our mother. My sisters and I were also treated disparagingly. However, our life together was peaceful under the wing of our mother's love.

When my mother was hospitalized in Taungyi, I took leave from school to be with her. My sister then took her turn to be at her bedside, when I was no longer allowed to take leave from school. During this time, my brother-in-law tried to abuse me sexually, probably thinking he could take his chances, since my sister and mother were not there. I could not understand why my brother-in-law attempted to abuse me. I was shocked but tried to calm down saying to myself that 'As long as I am right, it will be alright. Besides, nothing happened.' I could not let my sister

² *Naint Par Mhu* describes the status of a person who has to live in poverty and suffers from low self-esteem.

know since she thought of her husband as the whole world and loved him dearly. How could I tell her? I worried what would happen if I told her. I decided not to tell her. I felt terrible, though there was no possibility of expressing my pain. What would the neighbours say if they found out about this? How would they judge me? Would I be able to take all the consequences of any disclosure? I did not want my life to be ruined because of this. I told myself that I must protect myself. I was overwhelmed by worry about my mother's response? What if my brothers got angry?

I now understand why I could not have peace and happiness in my life. I did not understand why these things happen, but I know have a deep understanding. I have begun to wonder if a deep-rooted patriarchal system is responsible for the crime and violence in our society. Women are molded to have fear and always be conscious of being shamed. Moreover, women are taught to believe that it is better to die than live with shame.³ To maintain our 'dignity' we are taught not to express any feelings and to pretend that nothing has happened. When I shared my story in the training, I was aware that my voice was trembling, but I felt liberated from a dark shadow after its disclosure.

I strongly believe that our future demands that we share our knowledge and work together to let other sisters understand patriarchy. To improve the lives of women we must encourage them to express their feelings and to empower them with new ideas.

Ywe



³ Women are expected to preserve their 'dignity' and to prevent 'shame' even if it means losing their life trying to prevent sexual assault.

ONLY LOVE (*Ahchit Ta Khu Tae Thar*)⁴

The morning was calmly beautiful and the sky was clear except for one or two clouds. It was the early rainy season, the time for the resumption of classes – a new term at school. Nwe got up early in the morning and prepared for the day. Nwe felt good, particularly today, thinking of seeing old friends. Nwe's mother was awake and saying prayers in front of the Buddha. Nwe prepared for school and then set the breakfast on the table, before she called out to her mother.

'Mother, school is re-opening today and I have to go soon. We should have breakfast together.'

'OK *thamee*.⁵ Today, I will not go to work in the vegetable garden. I want to take a rest. But you go to school.'

Nwe took off to school after having breakfast with her mother. As for Nwe's mother, all the events of her past came back into her thoughts, as she lied on the bed alone. The village where Nwe and her mother lived was tranquil and at peace. They had moved to this little village for Nwe's education, when Nwe was about 10 years old.

Nwe's father, who worked for Nwe's maternal grandmother, came from a poor farming family. He and Nwe's mother fell in love but Nwe's grandmother kicked him out when she found out. Nwe's mother was so much in love that finally they eloped. Nwe's grandmother was so upset and angry that she disowned her own daughter. Nwe's father died from a gastric related illness unexpectedly when she was only about 10 year old.

Nwe and her mother then moved to this little village and struggled to survive each day. Nwe's mother endeavoured to provide her daughter with the most precious thing – education. None of Nwe's relatives helped her mother, although they were quite well off. Nwe's mother did not ask for their help, but worked very hard in the vegetable garden. Mother and daughter survived by selling vegetables and fruit from the garden. She thought that she would not have to work so hard, if her husband was still here with her. Her thoughts were cut short when Nwe returning from school called out to her mother.

'Mother'

'*Thamee*, you came home early.'

'Yes mother, it was only half a day since it is the first day of school and we don't have enough text books yet.'⁶

'Aw, aw, I will go to the garden for a while to work. Can you cook for dinner after you take a rest?'

'Yes, mother. Don't worry about it.'

Nwe was cooking dinner having taken a short rest and was waiting for her mother to come home. Meanwhile, she fetched water so that when her mother came back she could bath easily. Nwe loved her mother dearly and she knew that her mother loved her dearly. She adored her mother and felt bad about her having to work so hard for her. She would like to drop out of school so she can look after her mother. Nwe never had to work hard, until she was sixteen as all her mother wanted was for her to become an educated person. Her mother had urged her to continue studying at school.

⁴ This short fiction is based on a true story of a young woman.

⁵ *Thamee* means daughter.

⁶ Schools in Burma are supposed to be supplied with textbooks by the government. However, many schools do not receive the required textbooks on time, so teaching can not always start at the beginning of the term.

Nwe's mother returned about 5 o'clock in the evening.

'Mother, rest for a while and then take a bath. We will have dinner together, OK?'

'OK.'

After dinner, it began to get dark. Nwe's mother was lying on the bed, while Nwe prepared for the next day's school. Every night, Nwe and her mother would say a prayer together, before they went to bed. That was how they ended the day.

Nwe was in ninth standard that year and was entering her sixteen year. She was still happy with the thought of seeing friends from last year. Also, she had started to have feelings for *Ko*, who she had met, not long ago. *Ko* was from another village and was staying with his uncle so he could attend school. He was in the same class as Nwe. One day, Nwe received an unexpected letter written by *Ko* via a friend, around the time of the school mid term. *Ko* wrote in his letter that he was in love with her and that she had an innocent beauty. Nwe reading his letter was overcome with feelings that were completely new to her. Though, she waited, writing only when she had received two more letters from *Ko*.

During the Christmas holidays, Nwe asked her mother's permission to go to the Christmas celebrations.

'Mother, can I please go to the Christmas celebrations?'

'Who are you going with? I don't want you to go alone.'

'I will go with my girl friends.'

'Be good, *thamee*, and stay away from boys. We are poor, so people look down on us. A boy may try to do something bad to you. I could never bear it, if anything happened.'

'Sure mother. Please don't worry. I will go with my girl friends.' Nwe comforted her mother as she was preparing to leave.

'OK mother.'

'Don't be late *thamee*.'

'Yes, mother.'

However, only Nwe knew the truth. She was not going with her girl friends. She had made an arrangement to meet *Ko*. Love for *Ko* made her lie to her mother.

It was getting dark and she saw *Ko* waiting for her on the roadside.

'Did you have to wait for long?'

'A bit. I was worried that you may not come at all.'

'I promised you that I would come. I had to lie to my mother. I told her I was going out with my girl friends. Let's go now.'

Nwe and *Ko* had fun together at the celebrations and stayed until about 10 o'clock. They walked back to Nwe's home, but *Ko* stopped her half way back home.

'Nwe, can we take a rest here and talk.'

'No, it's late already. Mother will be really worried about me. We can talk as we walk.'

'No, we can never talk freely at school or at home. Friends are always around or your mother is there when I visit your home. If you love me you would sit down for a while to talk. Please.'

In the darkness, Nwe completely trusted him that night. As they walked back home Nwe wept silently for her loss.

'Nwe, please trust me and don't worry. Be careful. Don't let your mother find out about our secret.' *Ko* wiped away the tears on Nwe's face as he said not to worry and to trust him. *Ko* walked out into the darkness.

'Mother, are you asleep already?'

'No, I am not asleep. I am waiting for you. Who sent you back?'

'Some of my girlfriends, they just sent me to the door.'

Nwe had never lied to her mother before, but now she had lied many times because of her love for *Ko*. After the Christmas holidays everyone went back to school. There were extra classes for the students as the final exam approached. One day *Ko* saw Nwe home after an extra class.

'*Ko*, I have something to tell you.'

'Ahem, what is it Nwe.'

'I don't know what's happening with me lately. I cannot eat. I do feel not good and sometimes I want to throw up.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I am sure. I think I am pregnant and I have missed my period. Something is up. Tell me, what should I do?'

'Nwe, please listen carefully and don't get angry with me. Don't think I am saying this, because I don't want to take responsibility. But I am still studying and have no job. We should live together only when we finish school and manage to get a job. So can you terminate the pregnancy?'

Nwe was shocked to hear what *Ko* was saying. 'I will never do that, *Ko*. I will keep this child. I am brave enough to do that. You have your responsibility also. Please think about it.'

'OK Nwe. I am a responsible person. But please don't worry at this moment. Don't think too much. We can still keep this a secret. Don't tell anyone yet. We will get married when we finish our exams.' Although he tried to reassure her Nwe knew that *Ko* was suspicious about the pregnancy and was thinking that Nwe had slept with another man. He was silent and did not say anything more. Nwe though was happy to hear his reassurance at least for the time being.

Nwe and *Ko* were not able to talk during the exam period. *Ko* started to avoid Nwe. He would say a few words, when he could not avoid her. He would take off by saying he was busy and had something to do. He did not come to visit Nwe's home anymore. Nwe received a letter from him after the exam. The letter did not say much, only that he had to go back to his village, as his mother was sick. Nwe cried secretly and did not dare to tell her mother. Tears were Nwe's only companions now. There were many sleepless nights. She did not know how to tell her mother. She would spend entire nights thinking how could she get to *Ko*.

One day, Nwe's friend Poe Kyaw came to visit.

'Mi Nwe, I saw your *Ko*. I was visiting his village. I just came back last night.'

'Really? What did *Ko* say? Did he say anything about me? Did he send a letter for me? Is he alright?' Nwe enthusiastically asked all these questions.

'Wait, wait. I will tell you. He told me that he is going to Bangkok today for work. He didn't say or ask anything about you.' Nwe was dumbfounded and could no longer hear everything that Poe Kyaw was saying.

'Mi Nwe, you don't look very happy. I found out that *Ko* has a girlfriend in his village. Both families have acknowledged their engagement. He did not tell me about this though. I found out from some of his friends. I am very sorry for you Mi Nwe.' Nwe was speechless when she heard all this from Poe Kyaw. She tried very hard not to cry in front of her friend.

'I have got to go now. I have to help my mother.'

'Aye, aye, come and visit when you are free, will you?'

'OK, I will.'

Tears rolled down her face when Poe Kyaw left as she could no longer hold them back. It was lucky that her mother was out working in the vegetable garden. Nwe was thinking how to tell her mother, as her belly had begun to show. Every

morning, Nwe wanted to vomit and could no longer eat. All she wanted was to eat something savoury and sour. Nwe's mother was a bit suspicious and asked her.

'*Thamee*, what's wrong with you lately. Are you OK? Is there something wrong with you? Tell me. We have only each other. Who will you tell if you don't want to tell me, huh?'

'Mother, please, please don't be angry at me if I tell you what's happening. I, I, ... I am pregnant. It's about three months now.'

'Hemmm, who is it? Is he from this village?'

'No, mother. He is from another village. He was in the same class with me. He is working in Bangkok now. He has left me, mother. What do I do now? I am so stupid. I did not listen to you and this is the punishment for me not listening to your words.' Nwe and her mother could do nothing but cry.

'I told you to stay away from boys. Now you have been humiliated and left.' Her mother was astonished and she asked Nwe, 'How many times did you meet him secretly?'

'It was only once. Just once mother.' Nwe's mother was inconsolable. She could not imagine how this terrible thing had happened. She thought it must be their *karma* but she put on her brave face and said to Nwe...

'Don't you cry? Take this as your *karma*. You don't cry for a man who does not know how to be responsible. You have me. I will work harder to raise both you and your child.'

Her mother's unconditional love and Nwe's failure to listen to her mother's warnings made it harder for Nwe to forgive herself. All Nwe could now do was to cry in her mother's arms. Nwe thought about how many other women had been abused, humiliated, their dignity violated, because of their naivety. She came to realise that she had to continue regardless and be strong for her own child. Young women should be aware of this unforeseeable danger.

Thoo Lay Bo



Sympathy – Know How Now

I have become a person who dislikes and opposes injustice and discrimination though, until 1989 I was completely comfortable with our social norms that strictly defined a 'good woman'. I was even praised for being a 'good woman'. Only slowly did my opinions about being a 'good woman' begin to change.

I would like to share a personal experience. There was once a small village in Burma, Poppa Hta on the banks of *Thaungyin* River. It was a small village located very close to the border with Thailand, about two hours from Mae Sot. It was very alive and busy. People were always coming and going as many traders and brokers stopped and rested in the village before they crossed into Thailand. This route was also used by people who were leaving Burma to work in Thailand.

I was a soldier in the student army.⁷ An armed groups allied with my army checked and questioned people perceived as suspicious. I was assigned along with another female student soldier to guard two women who had been arrested for acting suspiciously. One night, one of the women was taken away for interrogation. At around 10 o'clock we prepared for bed, arranging the bedding for the two women on one side of the room with us on the other side next to the door. We turned off the light, as the young woman was trying to sleep. It was the cold season, so I pulled the blanket over my head and prepared to sleep.

Later I awoke to realize that someone had entered the room and was sexually abusing the young woman on the other side of the room. She did not dare to scream or shout. I was not brave enough to pull back my blanket to look and too scared to get the gun next to my head. When the man finished his act he left the room and in the process stepped on my feet. About half an hour later, the woman who had been interrogated was sent back to the room. I could not sleep any more, so I lit the lantern and passed the night with an awful feeling.

The next morning on the way back to our barracks, I asked my friend whether she was aware of what happened. She knew. The man had also stepped on her feet as he walked out of the room. I was amazed at our inability to discuss what had occurred in our room, even though both of us had lain awake, unable to sleep. We informed one of our leaders of the previous night's event. A few days later the two women were released. Later, we were informed of the identity of the perpetrator, that he had been brought to justice and punished. That little village was destroyed by government troops in 1995.

At the time, I was angry at the young woman, because she had been arrested for suspicious behaviour. This made it impossible for me to have any consideration for her. I looked down on her and blamed her for what happened. Since, she had been arrested by an allied group and as it did not happen to me, I thought I had nothing to worry about. After all, I was considered a 'good woman'. I did not think about why this had happened and forgot about these events as I considered them quite normal.

However, I began to wonder how many women in our society had similar experiences. A woman who is sexually abused or raped is perceived as 'bad' by her own parents, relatives and community. She is ostracized and looked down on. There are insults and some men even prey on women who have been sexually abused. There are probably many women who suffer this kind of abuse silently. After, I started to ask many difficult questions about sexual abuse occurs, I became able to

⁷ She was a member of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front, which was established in 1988 on the Thai-Burma border.

sympathize and understand their feelings. I now understand that women should not be sexually abused. I have come to understand that social rules and norms governing the behaviour of women in Burma have been designed to discriminate against women.

Although, men and women suffer extreme oppression in our society, I now clearly recognize discrimination against women. The oppression in our society is worse for women as they are never safe and secure, always having to worry about threats and possible dangers to their life.

Since the beginning of patriarchy, discrimination, injustice, colonization and competition and the notion of male superiority have grown. Patriarchy is still alive and strong. The role and actions of men has been recorded, but there is very little record of women's role in history. Women are discriminated against not only in our country, and in order to resist this discrimination, a women's movement has arisen everywhere in the world.

Ma Lay



A Day that Breaks the Silence

When I was growing up I heard very often about the rape of women, young and old in my neighborhood. Every time, upon hearing this news, I sensed a feeling in my heart, not capable of expression, but I wanted to take action against the perpetrators. This meant I grew up thinking there were only two types of human beings. One type was women, always at the mercy of men's lust and bad behavior. The other type was men, who will abuse women sexually, whenever lust and sexual desire comes upon them. Men who raped women were not only total strangers or their friends, but also the woman's father, brother, or grandfather. I was even suspicious of my own father, my cousins, my uncle and grandfather, who were all very dear to me. I slept near my father till I entered puberty. I loved my father, but did not dare to stay close once I found out what had happened to other women. My mind was not free and at ease.

These ideas altered my life and my feelings my environment. I thought that men were always lustful, continually desired sex and did not think twice about *who* they were going to sexually abuse. To me this explained why women were told that we must be careful with our dress, our talk, and our movements. Any sexual abuse or rape was blamed on the woman, not the man who committed the crime. I opposed and spoke out against this, but I too was accustomed to the idea that women were to blame. I was very careful in every possible way to prevent sexual attack, with just part of my everyday behavior, believing that I would be blamed. However, I still felt unsafe and became afraid and worried, when I had to travel especially if a lot of men were around. I became tired contemplating defending myself seeing my environment as unsafe. My dreaded fear was being raped.

However, I still did not understand that some men were wolves in sheep's clothing, until it was too late. The disguised wolf was a trusted friend of my father and a distant relative. He was also a good family friend. I respected him as an uncle or an elder brother, since he was 13 years my senior. He was married, though they could not have any children. When my father passed away, we faced family hardships and he became more helpful. We would talk to him if there were any problems. Therefore, I was shocked and saddened, when he, who we all thought of as part of the family, tried to abuse me sexually. He took advantage of my family's trust. One day, he asked my mother's permission to take me somewhere, as he needed by help for a business reason. Consequently, I was talked into going to his house where he attempted to sexually abuse me. I felt in total darkness. It was like hell. I had told myself that I would not be a victim of such a hideous crime. I used all my energy to defend myself and was fortunate enough to narrowly escape physical abuse, though not the mental torment. I was drawn into thoughts that people would not trust or believe me, if they found out what had taken place. The thought of being blamed created unspeakable anguish.

At the same time, I was disappointed with myself, not being able to do anything. I asked myself 'Why can't I do something to him? Or why didn't I do something to him?' I was in mental agony. I wanted to make him pay for what he did, but I was too afraid of my own society. There were no organizations or groups that would stand by me. Justice could not be obtained with traditional or customary methods. The woman can be compensated monetarily, but there is no other punishment and we are told to forget about the event. This is the traditional method of settling these crimes. The only measure for the loss of a women's dignity is money.

The area where we lived was controlled by an ethnic armed group and he was quite a powerful man in this organization. Those who could take action on this matter would not dare to question him. Even if they dared, I did not have complete trust, since they all were men. I was not satisfied with the women's organization in our area. The aim of the organization was to obtain rights for women, but they could do very little, even when their own members faced violence. With all this in my head, I felt weak even considering any disclosure. So I held my tongue. I knew there were many other women like me, who suffer in silence as it is very hard to disclose sexual abuse in our society.

Fortunately, I was able to open my heavy heart to my lover. I trusted him and he gave me much comfort. Although, not brave enough to reveal the truth publicly, I was able to tell my family and friends, with my lover's encouragement and support. I expected to hear words of blame and receive accusatory looks. Instead, there was reassurance and support from all of them. I was able to trust, as they offered me complete understanding and listened to everything I said. I informed the man that my family knew about what he had tried to do and he no longer dared to visit our house. Telling my mother I felt was the right action, especially since he had demanded otherwise. Nonetheless, I was still disappointed with myself as I could not do anything to make him pay for his wrong-doing.

On reflection, I understand that it was not easy for me to disclose what happened all at once, as gender stereotyping is deeply rooted in our society. I am still trying very hard not to be afraid of being blamed, being looked at suspiciously, and being judged for things that are not my responsibility. I am trying to tackle this problem. I believe there are many other women out there who have experienced and suffered the same fate. We have to empower these women and open their eyes so they do not suffer in silence. It is difficult for women to emerge from their silence alone. It is very important that women have resources and organizations that provide support, so that they can be brave and tell what should not have happened. We alone cannot pull them out. They must understand why this happened and why it should not have happened. We should be ready to offer all our help, when women try to emerge from silent suffering. Men who take advantage of women will only stop abusing and violating women, when women start to speak and break the silence. I am determined to work with other sisters towards a society, where women do not suffer in silence; where women are empowered to speak out and where everyone, men and women are secure, safe and live in peace. There will be no peace without security and safety

Miss Skinny



Under An Umbrella

As a teenager I was very fond of going to festivals. One day I wanted to go to a novice ordination in another village a short distance away. My mother did not want me to go, but gave with my persistence. Accompanied by a friend, I rode my bicycle to the village. I was so delighted to ride under the moonlight, even though the route was rough.

Upon our arrival we briefly watched the *Anyeint Pwe*.⁸ Then we looked around for where the novices were being ordained and offered our homage to the Lord Buddha. Later, around 9 o'clock, while watching the *Anyeint Pwe*, the rain started. The man next to me had an umbrella and started a friendly conversation. The man next to my friend had also starting talking to her. The two of us were so happy to chat and have new friends. When it started to rain hard the man tried to shelter me with his umbrella. I became worried as I had no friends in this village. However, my friend said she had relatives there, and we could spend the night with them. I felt bad about this, but realized there was no other choice.

As it was raining the two men accompanied us as we walked to the house of my friend's relatives. My friend walked with the other man a short distance in front. An unexpected thing happened, which shocked me immensely, though my friend did not notice. The man insulted me appallingly. He pulled one of my hands and made me hold and stroke his penis. I pinched his hand with anger and told him to stop it. I exclaimed 'How dare you' and 'What did he think of me to insult me this way?' Then he started to walk slowly, but I did not want to shelter under his umbrella anymore and walked in the rain. He said he wanted to go for 'man's business' and asked me to hold his umbrella and torch, begging me to wait. I continued walking taking his umbrella and torch only to hear his voice saying that he could not see the path and asking me to light the way. I did only to see him running towards me with his pants unzipped, from where his penis hung and dangled. I became so frightened and dropped everything in my hand and ran, with him chasing after me.

My friend and I were lucky to escape. I felt safe only when we had reached the house of my friend's relatives. I could not sleep the whole night and blamed myself for coming to the festival. I did not want to meet this kind of man again in my life. In the morning we headed back to our village, only to see him when we were halfway home. He greeted us by honking his car horn. I loathed him so much. How could I return his greeting?

I tried so hard to forget. I told myself that this could happen to any girl or woman. However, I thought little about why boys and men insult girls and women in this manner. Now I understand that I was violently insulted by the man's behaviour and that sexual assault can take many different forms and can happen to any women, anywhere. I would like to share this with other women in the spirit of sisterhood, so they can learn from my experience.

Shwe Hnin Set



⁸ *Anyeint Pwe* is a non-dramatic performance where a female performer dances and sings to the accompaniment of light music. She is usually supported by comedians.

Women and Custom

Each generation has been taught that our customs and traditions are something that must be preserved. We are not encouraged or allowed to assess or analyse the suitability of our traditions. We are only expected to practice and preserve. Some of us know that not all our customary practices are suitable or acceptable, though we continue to act in the traditional manner. We never think about resisting or questioning, rather we hold on to bad customs, fearing lose of culture.

Our custom is to believe that if the first child is a son, we are more noble, worthy and lucky. Our belief that a woman's religious nobility increases when she has 3 or 5 sons is deeply rooted in our heart and soul.⁹ However, what do we think of this ideal if these women have bad sons and bring nothing but suffering, worries, bitterness and pain? Can we say that mothers who have only daughters do not gain religious nobility, despite being taken care of in their old age, enabling them to find peace in religion before they die? We need to think about the impact of this custom.

A son who becomes a novice or enters monk hood makes merit, because he shows gratitude to his parents for what they have given him. What about a daughter who enters nun hood? Is this regarded as making merit? Parents encourage their sons to enter spiritual life, as it also gives them merit, but discourage their daughters.¹⁰ The reason offered is that there will be no one to assist or take responsibility for the household chores. The result is that sons who do not really want to be become novices or monks do so for at least 7 or 9 days. Whereas, daughters who really wish to enter nun hood are not allowed to fulfill their desire to escape – *samsara*¹¹ – the worldly life. These are the consequences of this present custom or tradition.

Another custom teaches the young to fear, love and respect our teachers, but this is only good to some extent. We have to do whatever our teachers ask without any complaint. How many despicable teachers have molested children in grades two or three? There are many children who cannot tell their parents what they go through. When they try to speak, the event is not only rejected, but they are scolded and reprimanded. How many of those children are in our society? This must be examined and we must question what is wrong in our society. Many young children who are about to enter puberty, including myself, are fondled and sexually molested by respected teachers who touch and squeeze their breasts and other body parts.

We must assess the trust we have in our own relatives – cousins, brothers, uncles, and grandfathers. Parents must consider the potential of danger of placing their daughters in the home of relatives. Usually parents do not think twice about this, trusting that relatives will not harm their daughters. Some readers will also know about the sexual abuse of young women and girls by trusted relatives. We can no longer blindly believe and accept our customs and traditions. We must clearly examine our cultural practices.

We are taught that even when we encounter bad male behaviour while traveling, we must not protest, because we are told that girls and women must be

⁹ The significance of three and five sons derives from Buddhism as practiced in Burma. There are three objects of veneration in Buddhism - the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The five infinite venerables of Buddhism are the Buddha, Dharma, the Sangha, parents and teachers.

¹⁰ Parents believe they are performing a meritorious deed when their son or sons becomes a novice or a monk. In Theravada Buddhism in Burma, only men can attain Buddha-hood. Therefore, parents attain a lot of merit from their sons entering the monkhood.

¹¹ *Samsara* means the cycle of rebirth.

aware of *shame and have fear*¹². Even when we are very angry about being badly treated we are not encouraged to speak up, but to accept the wrong. I even felt bitter about being a woman and believed that it was bad luck to be a woman in this kind of world. However, these thoughts caused me to generalise the bad behaviour of some, finding scapegoats to release my anger and dissatisfaction. However, it was the innocent who tended to suffer from my anger.

Some men look down on women treating us badly and some even think women are just objects of 'entertainment'. This is part of our cultural inheritance, making it seem there is no escape. However, this is just another reason to assess the suitability of some of our customs and traditions.

Another custom or tradition requires that we always be grateful to our *kyay zuu shin*.¹³ If we are ungrateful or act badly towards any *kyay zuu shin* then we will suffer '*kan gyi htaik mae*'¹⁴ and be punished as if we had shed the blood of the Buddha. This teaches us to be very passive and not courageous. However, some so-called *kyay zuu shins* take advantage of us and there are probably many women who have had this experience. Women have to resolve this problem by themselves, since we are expected not to be ungrateful. Is it fair to let the unjust acts of a *kyay zuu shin* go unpunished, as if they have never happened?

Every country, nationality and locality has their customs and traditions. There are definitely customs to be proud of and are worth cherishing. However, we should not strictly follow and practice customs and traditions, when there are adverse consequences. Women, their families, loved ones and the community, are all adversely affected by the strict following of custom. These troubles are rooted in a system where we are expected to accept and strictly follow customs without question. Unless we change this restrictive perspective of our world, we will continue to live in this *samsara*. We are playing the same old record, over, and over again. The argument that accepting customs without question is an "Asian Value" is not plausible. If that is so, I will have to think hard for those people who claim to be champions of women's rights and empowerment.

Mi Mon Nan



¹² Women and girls in Burma are brought up to believe that dignity is maintained only by not disclosing shameful events or experiences. The phrase '*Hiri uttapa*' (shame and fear of sinning and immodesty) comes from Pali, but is often misused to restrict the freedom of women and girls.

¹³ *Kyay zuu shin* is a person who provides food, employment, and a place to live until you are old enough and capable of providing for yourself.

¹⁴ '*Kan gyi htaik mae*' is the punishment for having committed any of the five cardinal sins – i) matricide, ii) patricide, iii) killing an *Arhat*, iv) shedding the blood of the Buddha, and v) creating division among the *Sangha*.

Bitter Experiences in My Life

I am from eastern Shan State. My life has not been happy, as it was not possible for me to obtain what I most wanted – education. The government did not build a school in our village, as fighting and battles occurred very often in our area.¹⁵ To attend school we had to travel to the nearest town. My parents could not afford to send us to the schools in town, having only enough to survive each day. My father was frequently recruited as a porter for the army, so could not support our family. Many other people in my village did not have the chance to study for the same reasons. Many people died unnecessarily from illness and disease as there was no clinic in our village. We were unable to the hospital in the town, as the journey was dangerous and the road was often impassable. Six of my family died and I faced death from malaria. Since, I was keen to study I attended the bible school in our village.

Upon completion of my studies, I served as an *'Arwangayli'*¹⁶ in another village, encountering many difficulties living with another family. There was one night that I will never forget. At around 11 p.m., the old man who owned the house, entered my room and tried to rape me. I screamed for help. The man said 'Don't scream, I will kill you if you do.' I screamed and kicked and was lucky enough to escape, running ran out of the house. It was dark. I continued running full of fear, tripping, hurting my knees and forehead. I did not stop, fearing the old man would catch me. I ran to another house and lost consciousness. When I regained consciousness my whole body was shivering and was as cold as ice. I cried with fear, missing my parents. This would not have happened, if I had stayed with them in my village.

The next morning, I went to the village head to report the previous night and to request that charges be laid against the old man.

'Women usually speak nonsense. I check out what happened first and we will see. If it is true, I will tell the chairman of the town and charge the old but you have to wait 3 days,' said the headman and left.

I went to see the headman after 3 days. He said 'Nothing really bad really happened to you. So don't sue him. I will tell him not to do it again. OK?' then he completely ignored me. I was very sad and angry, but could not do anything more. 'Was this my fate?' I was so heart broken learning that there was no one to help me. I returned to my family. Later a friend from the village told me that the old man had bribed the headman to drop any charges laid by me.

I became sick due to depression and went to stay with an aunt in Thailand, where I received some treatment. I decided to stay and work in Thailand, obtaining a job as a housemaid with a Thai family, experiencing discrimination, degradation and oppression and the difficulty of not knowing the language. Would this be my life? Was this going to be my life? What am I going to face in the future? I thought these misfortunes would be with me forever. However, I made contact with a women's organization, stayed and learned. The chance to attend the peace building training was a tonic for me. My thoughts changed for the better and my mind became stronger. I was empowered by the training, gaining a better understanding of the methods that can be used to build peace in our society. Peace is for everyone –

¹⁵ This is a reference to the civil war and the fighting was between the soldiers of the military regime and one of the armed opposition groups.

¹⁶ *Arwangayli* is a Christian female pastor.

every nationality, religion, gender and class. So let us all try to become a light of peace for the world in which we live.

Ma Shwe Pann



Understand Now

At the age of thirteen, I became overwhelmed as I began to realize the implications of being a girl. I began to notice that my family, relatives and friends began to treat me differently. Every day, I was told 'not to behave this and that way', 'not to sit in a such way', 'not to speak that way', 'don't laugh like that', and 'don't do this and that'. My parents said 'You are no longer a child. You are entering puberty. Don't wear pants or skirts. Wear a *longyi*¹⁷ and make it long.' These types of rules were for me and my younger sister, but never for our brothers. I thought that all girls in the whole world had to dress and behave just like me.

My close male friends who I had grown up with started to change their attitude and treat me differently. They wanted to touch me here and there. They would chase and tease me on the way to school or the market. They would say 'Hey, where are you going? Are you alone? Do you want me to accompany you? I will come, because I love you, babe. I will do it because I worry about you.' They were quite annoying experiences for me, happening every time I left my house. We are disturbed by young men, when we go to the festival or the movies and are never left in peace.

I was on the road most of the time, traveling between my mother and father, who were separated. I encountered unwanted attention on the trips by men who were the same ages as my brother, father, grandfather and my uncle. Sometimes, men who were family friends would treat me differently behind the back of my parents.

The attention and the words were unknowingly embedded in my heart and soul. I would feel unsafe, nervous and even worry when I was in a room alone. I now understand why I felt this way, though I am still wary of how I will be perceived when I say certain things. I feel confined by this. I want to be able to taste the essence of freedom and to ask many questions. 'Why are the rights and freedom of men and women so different, we all eat the same food and inhale the same air?' Though, I am still distrustful of others, too shy in public and worry about almost everything. Attending the training outside of Burma as enabled me to understand the root cause of my problems. I now understand that all ideas and beliefs are just human constructs that can be altered and improved for a better society. I also understand that men and women live in a cycle of suffering, because of a deep rooted patriarchal system.

Yaung Lae Lae



¹⁷ *Longyi* is the Burmese word for sarong.

No Matter How Well the Cock Crows

I would like to share my feelings, about a popular Burmese saying I have heard, since my childhood. Though, firstly, I would like to express my heart felt belief that we need to change our concepts, our beliefs and conduct for the betterment of our society. The values of our society are characteristic of a patriarchal system, with women viewed as secondary to men. Women rarely have to opportunity to participate widely and take up important roles in their own society. In every society women are brought up to believe they are less important and this has become part of women's consciousness.

Women in our society always hear that there will be no dawn, no matter how well a hen crows. Many men use this saying to disparage women. I am entering into a debate about whether a hen can crow to lighten the first ray of a new day. I am saying that the first ray of the sun will come to the world, even if the cock doesn't crow. No matter how long and hard the cock crows, to help the hen lay the egg, there will be no egg without the hen.

All women should know and understand that we are restricted and constrained in many ways because of a deep rooted patriarchal system. We must work hard for change for a better future. Women need to awaken from their own deep sleep of double standards. A changed society requires that we pace peaceful steps towards a better future.

October Saung



Journey of a Flower

A friend of my brother possibly realised I was preparing to go on a long trip. He requested my brother's assistance to ask me to help him return to his home in Burma. He did not know the route well and needed someone to accompany him. I told my brother, I would help since he was his good and trusted friend. Usually, another woman accompanied me when I traveled, otherwise my brother would find an escort, usually the sixteen year old son of my sister. On this particular journey, I was accompanied by my nephew.

After traveling on the bus for the whole day, at about five o'clock in the afternoon, we reached the half way mark, where we rested for the night. The place was a friend's house, where I always stayed when I made this journey. It felt just like my home. However, on this particular trip only the two daughters of my friend greeted us, informing us that their parents were away. We cooked and ate together around 8.30 pm. Everyone, after the dinner wanted to retire as we were tired from the day's trip.

We had to think about how to arrange the sleeping area, since the house had only one room for guests. We arranged beds in one corner for my brother's friend. My nephew and I took the other corner. I was asleep with the ease of being with my nephew and from the tiredness of the trip. Around midnight, I felt something on my arm. I got up, switched on the light and looked around, but saw nothing. I went back to sleep but again felt something on my arm. This time I saw my brother's friend next to me, staring. I screamed at him, 'What was trying to do?' He could not say anything and was just gaping at me. I woke the two girls and told them what happened. They did not know what to do, since there were no adults in the house. I was so angry. I thought how dare he, do this to me, after I had helped him to go through all the checkpoints.¹⁸ I wanted to kill him right then and there. Finally, he apologized saying he was wrong. I was scared of him and pondered my response. I could not sleep the rest of the night and prayed for morning light to come. I was 20 years old then.

I later realised that he had acted in that manner, because we were all young. He was the oldest in the house and fully believed in his superiority being a man. He felt powerful so he dared to take his chance. This type of thinking motivates men to take advantage of women and abuse and insult them verbally and physically. Many men consider they can do anything, believing they have power.

To analyse the origin of male superiority we must go back to pre-history. At the end of the matriarchal era, humans were nomadic, moving to find greener pastures looking for food and to avoid natural disasters. Shortages of food caused humans to group and fight for their survival. In the matriarchal era all property and food were shared within the group, but shortages of food gradually saw a shift in human behavior. Everyone wanted their own possessions and property was no longer shared. Men started to desire children as their own and women in turn became the property of men. The development of private property came with the desire to have power-over other people. The protection of private property led to violence and a sense of its normalcy. Consequently, discrimination against women in all areas including culture, economics, religion, and politics followed. This discrimination was

¹⁸ The story is set in India, where many Burmese live in exile. The police often set up checkpoints to check if people are legally resident in the country.

reinforced and became part of daily life through language, religious doctrine and other beliefs.

Women make up half the world's population, but we suffer more under a patriarchal system. We will not be able to attain peace unless this is changed. We should also think carefully about how these practices affect the behavior of men. Therefore, let us try harder to change the mindset of male superiority, to bring about peace on earth.

Mammy



Women's Life under the Wall of Custom



Dawn to till dusk
Daily household work
Cooking, fetching, washing for all
Mother, all for the sake of being a woman



Since my young life began
Reasons given for the correct behaviour
Words of custom and tradition
Don't suppose they are wrong



But!
Words of custom and tradition
Don't excite me
If I have to share my view



Men are human. We are human too
Mother, Don't you believe this?
Though we are the same
We don't dare say anything, to our beloved master of the household
Even if he is having affairs
All that we do is stay home crying
Stay with our beloved head of the household, Till death do us part
Is this custom just?
Mother, it is not fair



Men or Women, there should be no discrimination
Living in togetherness
To flourish freely
For a brighter and better future
Mother, Shouldn't you consider this?



Equal rights and opportunities
Let this be for all
Oh...mother
Wouldn't that be delightful?

Khet Khet Wai



From an Oppressed Life

Women in Burma as they grow up experience extensive discrimination. They are considered inferior and not as valuable as men. Women do not have *hpoun*.¹⁹ The family generally does not consider or promote higher education for girls. Women are disparaged with sayings, such as '*Mainma Phyet Pye Pye*'.²⁰ Women are believed to be unworthy and unsuitable to govern a nation. All these perceptions mean women have to spend most of their life in the kitchen. Married women are led to believe that their husbands are their gods and their sons their masters and they must be treated as such. Women have to accept every word spoken by their husbands. Once married, women lose nearly all their rights and can not make their own decisions. In our society, married women are responsible for everything in their household and family. Men receive respect for any effort undertaken for the family, whereas the effort of women is given little account.

Women in Burma have become so accustomed to these perceptions that it is part of the culture. Many women do not perceive these ideas as discriminatory. Women think of themselves as inferior, valueless and are led to believe that all men should be treated with respect. These perceptions are part of women's belief system. Women should be aware of how our traditions, our religion, our social structures and beliefs are discriminatory. An example of discrimination in Buddhism is that women are not allowed to enter certain parts of the pagoda.²¹ We have often seen the sign "No women allowed".

Women have the ability as men do, but we are not given the chance to lead, head or take higher positions. We are all aware of men who are smart and intelligent, but there are many men who are not as smart or intelligent as women can be. Women should rid themselves of the old perceptions and live and work towards a better family life and society. We should not forget that we can not only manage a family or a household but the whole nation. Everyone should recognize that women have the capacity for leadership and the ability to fill important positions in their communities and societies. The only problem is that women are not given the chance. To do this, we have to try harder.

The first thing women must do is to work to prevent abuse within the family and in marriage. In another words, women must say no to domestic violence. Sometimes the husband considers himself the head of the family, but he drinks, spends his time playing cards and beats his wife. Sometimes, women in these circumstances do not try to get out of the situation, only thinking about their family and community. This effectively makes them suffer in silence. Some women have even died from living under such dire circumstances. Having to lose our valuable life to a meaningless marriage is no use for ourselves, as well as for our society. We must think about this seriously. We can find a solution. Never forget that we also

¹⁹ *Hpoun* is something that men can only possess. Men have *hpoun* arising from the accumulation of past meritorious deeds. This is part of the Burmese Buddhist belief system, where men are closer to Buddha-hood than women. This means that only men can possess glory and power. Men can lose their *hpoun* if their head comes in contact with any part of a women's body below the waist. This is why women's clothing that covers the body below the waist is always hung below men's clothing. Men are not allowed to wash women's clothing as it will also cause them to lose their *hpoun*.

²⁰ This common saying reflects the belief that women if they occupy positions of power will destroy the nation.

²¹ The concept of *hpoun* is behind the prohibition on women entering the higher parts of the pagoda. Entering certain areas of the pagoda entails the lower part of the body being higher than some of the Buddha statues.

have qualities and abilities. Otherwise, our precious lives will be destroyed by the men who know no value.

Narw Narw



My Best Friend in the Trust Circle²²

One night, awakened by my conscience, with vivid images of my past, my heart trembled. I was terrified by my thoughts. The images were of a close friend whose appearance and manner strictly conformed to social expectations. To her, I am grateful as poetic side of nature can now be expressed. Now my feelings can be represented in words.

The most horrifying weapon in any society is for people to hold deeply ingrained values and beliefs that are never questioned. Deeply-ingrained values that are never questioned are the foundation of our society. An ingrained belief can become a horrible weapon in the hands not only of the individual, but an organization, community, and the state. The central problem for a society that never questions its, deeply held values is that prejudice and discrimination flourish. I would like to share a personal experience with this problem.

There is a woman in my life. In our letters we call each other '*chit swe tarw*'.²³ She is much older and more educated. She is womanly according to the accepted norms and standards of our society with the qualities that are expected of a woman. She is proud of her womanly appearance and manner. Our town is quite small, so everyone knows her well and calls her 'beauty queen'. She has beautiful long hair, of medium height, a fair complexion, walks and moves gracefully. Many boys are crazy about her, but she has no feelings for boys, apart from being annoyed. She, who everyone considers innocent and well mannered, openly told me about her feelings for me. I listened carefully and felt her words. To be attached or fall in love with someone who you are close to seemed to me natural. Physical closeness and attachment are foundations for falling in love. She told of feelings that were about love between same the sex. I love her too, but my love was different.

I was surprised by her openness and scared. I felt something within me was not right. In our society it is assumed that in a same sex couple, one must be masculine and the other feminine. I asked and questioned myself. Who am I? What am I? Why is this? What is wrong with my appearance? I realized I am a woman

²² 'Trust circles' was a technique used in the training, where a small number of women formed a group where they would share and discuss their life experiences.

²³ This is the Burmese for 'beloved'.

with some masculine characteristics, in physical appearance and ways of thinking. I believe I have been like this since birth. My friend and I understand and accept me as a woman. Because of her I have a clearer understanding of myself. Our love for each other has become more serious and the fondness between us had grown. However, we thought it impossible for us to love because of religion, tradition, custom and own beliefs. We had never seen a same sex couple. We thought it was totally impossible for us and this kind of relationship unnatural. How can the same things come together? We constrained our feelings fearing that it was against nature. We were divided and troubled, because we believed it sinful for the same kind to come together. I was tortured by my own conscience and passed the time with growing self disgust, suffering mental anguish.

In our society a woman is supposed to get married at a proper age, regardless of her ability to survive on her own or stand on her own feet. No woman can be complete without a husband and her parents forced her to marry a man she does not love. She married against her wishes and did so merely to be a good daughter. How can she be happy in a marriage that has no true love? How can any marriage be good and happy, if it is entered into, just to obey tradition, custom, and a belief that demands us to accept patriarchy?

Peace builder
San Nyein Thu



Building Inner Peace for Oneself

I enjoyed and found every session in the training useful. The training will have a significant impact, if applied in our families, organizations and communities. The sessions appreciated the most in the training were those on 'inner peace' and its development. The practice of deep thinking allows me to sense the real essence of peace within myself.

The trainers told us that inner peace is required for peace in our family, our organization and society. This created many questions for me. "How can I build peace within for myself?" Previously, I had understood peace as the resolution of problems and conflict within our families, communities, organizations, social groups, and between religions. I was intrigued by the trainer's explanation having even given peace building training, but I had never heard of building 'inner peace'.

In one session, "A Peace Beacon in a Life Full of Tears," we were asked to write and share our feelings about our life as children, as a young person and our present life. There were many different feelings amongst the fourteen participants with some happy, some depressed and others very upset.

The trainers taught us methods and techniques to still our minds, when experiencing strong emotions. Thinking about the past entails reliving happiness, sadness, anger and regret. Thinking about the future means our mind will be filled with hope and fear. The future mainly depends upon the present and a still mind

requires that we concentrate on the present. To still our minds, we learned to close our eyes, sit comfortably and practice breathing *in* and *out*. We did this exercise everyday to develop peace within ourselves. To impart or disseminate peace we must know the feeling of peace for ourselves. A friend said that if a person has genuine internal peace, then they can deal with any external changes.

Another technique we practiced to still our mind was yoga, which we learnt is also good for our physical health. Yoga improves blood circulation and can lessen trauma and mental anguish. Yoga is the best method to assist with tiredness, aches, numbness and tenseness that comes from study and work. It is a good practice especially for women as we usually suffer silently, as it is difficult for us to open our hearts. As time passes we are barely able to catch our breath, cannot eat and sleep, then we become physically sick. The trainers explained to us we can limit these problems by practicing yoga.

We also practiced stilling our mind with silent eating. Women who are going to build peace have to know how to keep their minds still and should meditate. Meditation is not just part of one religion, as every religion has its own form of meditation. We need to develop mindfulness in everything, even when eating, angry or happy. It is a way of achieving a stable mind, happiness and ease within ourselves.

We also practiced walking meditation to still our mind. While walking, just as in sitting meditation, we should acknowledge any thoughts and then bring our thoughts back. One of the trainers explained that it is very difficult to bring our mind and body together. Many thoughts will come into our head as we try to gather our mind, but all we have to do is acknowledge these thoughts and keep walking and breathing in and out. We heard birds singing and could smell the flowers. Some of my friends shared their experience of this practice stating that every step brought a sense of freedom.

I felt myself, with the daily practice of sitting and walking meditation, yoga and silent eating. Meditation lessened my worries and made it possible for me to gather my mind. One of the participants said she meditates when she thinks she is going to get depressed or hear something depressing. Clear blue sky cannot be seen when it is cloudy. This can also be applied to our mind, as if our mind is not clear we will have worries. However, we know that behind those clouds there is a clear blue sky. This knowledge enables us to have wisdom that is full of peace.

We also learned traditional Thai massage from professional masseurs. We practiced giving each other a massage, helping us to relax and not to think about others for a change. Women often forget to love and to take good care of them selves. To become peace builders in the wider world, we need to look closer to home. We should analyse and ask ourselves if we have peace within. To build genuine peace for others, we need to know how to build peace within ourselves.

Nu Nu Nge



Women and Peace

We talk and hear a lot about 'conflict'. We are often confuse and unclear about the form of conflict we are addressing, especially when it comes to Burma's long running inter-ethnic war. Very often, armed conflict is assumed as soon as the word 'conflict' is uttered. We have heard some even saying "there is no such thing as ethnic conflict in Burma. It's just the conflict between the military regime and the rest." These utterances cause confusion and undermine any understanding of the root causes of a conflict that has been going for decades. Confusion then leads to failure to find a solution for the conflict that we face in Burma.

A few years back, the role of women was discussed at a conference held in Chiang Mai. There were a lot of uncomfortable moments, particularly when the violation of women's rights by Burmese customary and religious law was discussed. A respected law expert expressed his discomfort with a shaking voice, upon hearing "*such a thing*." He apparently took it personally.

Two years ago, in the 23rd International Human Rights Training Program people from different countries had to present an adage from our respective cultures, which drew distinctions between men and women. The hall was full of gasping when, a well known saying from Burma - "Your son is your master, your husband your god" was presented. I would like to point out that we don't often see things clearly, when they are very close to home.

When we talk about 'women's issues' especially women's rights, we are often mistakenly assumed to be against, dislike or hate men. This is not just happening in Burmese society. At a peace conference held at Melbourne University in 2003, a woman who raised the issue of conflict and the culture of masculinity was quickly derailed by an honourable and dignified male speaker. Some of the conference participants and audience were clearly uncomfortable with what passed between the speakers.

In the same year at a conference in Sydney, Australia, a woman activist talked about violence against women. She wittily illustrated the violence suffered by women using the '*Four Yas*'²⁴. Many of the men became uncomfortable. They began denying that they would perpetuate violence against their mothers, their sisters, their nieces, their wives or their daughters. There was no a hint or suggestion from the woman who spoke that any of the men in the audience were abusing and violating the rights of any of the women *in their life*.

When we talk about 'peace' many people understand this as the absence of war. Can we say no war is equivalent to actual peace? Can we continue to deny violence against women and any violation of women's rights in our society with the idea that the men in Burma are noble and well-behaved? Can we continue to misuse our religion and beliefs to deny our problems by saying that our religion, culture, traditions, customs have taught us not to denigrate and perpetrate violence against women? Some of us cling to the idea that *our* men from Burma would not do such horrible things.

Many of us talking about domestic violence have been asked by some men and women, if we have been beaten by our husbands. There are many women, beaten by their husbands, who cannot always present their own voice due to fear or because they can not obtain assistance. For these women, we need to speak out. When we speak out about human rights abuses and violations by the military regime in

²⁴ Explanation of '*Four Yas*' *Ya* – get married, *Yoe* – become bored, *Yite* – get beaten up, *Yone* – ends up in the family court.

Burma, we are often not talking about abuses and violation that we have necessarily suffered. There are many people in Burma suffering because of the violation of human rights and they can not present their own voice. However, the effect of such abusive rulers has impacted upon all of us whether we remain in Burma or stay outside of our country. We must speak out for them and for ourselves.

We are criticising the military regime in Burma because our lives have become so miserable under its rigid control. We live not only under our own cultural restrictions, but with authoritative restrictions so rigid that there is no space for us to grow bigger and better. Despite the restrictions we still manage to survive the dire conditions. However, it is not enough. We must be able to see, experience and understand that beyond our restricted lives there is a whole new world.

It is very important that the rights of humans, regardless of their gender, religion, race, sexuality and social status, are recognised and respected. Unless, when we are able to see each individual as a member of humanity we will be able to obtain peace.

Myint Myint San



Politics and Love Affairs



One

My life has been in bewilderment
Could be due to politics
Don't bother to love or to be loved
Because of that politics
Survival is more vital, than that of my love life
Education had ran off from my life



Two

My life has been in bewilderment
Gives me a heavy chest at every thought
Once I think of my country's future
The heart starts to beat so fast
Tell myself revolution is my priority
Stay away from love affairs



Three

My life has been in bewilderment
Hoping for peace
No changes in political situation
My life is in a circle of bewilderment
Peace and love in my life
Have been too far because of politics

Yaung Lae Lae



The Evil Inside Us

I have a childhood memory from when I was about 6 years old. My father, who had not lived with us since I was young, visited one day. He saw me playing with some Indian girls from the neighborhood. All of a sudden, without saying anything, he dragged me into the house and spanked me. He had never done anything like that, not even a scold or a shout. But this time he looked at me very angrily and I was afraid. 'Why are you playing with them? They are Indians and are dirty. Don't be friends with them. Don't ever play with them again.' I was in pain and shock and confused, wondering why he had said such a thing. I knew my friends were Indians, but had never thought of them as dirty and shouldn't play with them.

As the days passed, I continued school and my friendship with the Indian girls stayed the same. We played and we had fun, but there was a question in my mind. What was it in my father's mind that made him think, what I did not? My six-year-old mind could go no further for an answer or an understanding. This puzzle stayed in my heart, along with many other puzzles from my teenage life.

My involvement in the struggle for democracy and human rights in our country, has led me to learn and understand that we are all part of a society's life-cycle and as human beings we are involved in its perpetuation. This has enabled me to find some understanding and answers for many of my childhood questions. Perhaps this provides an answer, if not the answer, to the above event that so upset my father. My father was discriminating against my friends, because they were Indian descendents. He was discriminating against them, because they were not 'we'.

Discrimination and prejudice is something that each of us has become accustomed to and culturally internalized. When someone is different to us, we tend to treat the person in a different way. We look down on them, push them aside, neglect, or discard those who are different from us. We are prejudiced against people because they don't speak the same language, don't have the same skin colour, don't have the same wealth, education or social status, don't practice the same religion or have the same beliefs, don't think the way, and so on.

Human beings tend to easily discriminate. Minorities are discriminated by those who happen to be the majority. We think our culture is the best and this leads us to think other cultures are inferior. We make judgments about the values of other cultures measuring them against our own. Despite praising the culture of diversity, we tend to have no or very little tolerance to realize, appreciate and practice the essence of diversity. We tend to marginalize those who have different opinions and would rather not work with them. Once we marginalize, we pre-judge everything they may do.

A common problem is that while we try to stand against those with more sources of power (money, education) who discriminate against us, we can also unknowingly discriminate, boss and take control of others whose sources of power are less than ours. If we do not understand this, we will continue to fall into the trap and the cycle of discrimination. There is an evil inside each and every one of us, as we are human beings. As much as there is good, there is also evil, but what is most important for each and every one of us is to be constantly aware of that evil and try to overcome it. There is evil inside me and I am trying to overcome it.

Khin Ohmar



Mingalabar²⁵

Mingalabar everyone.

I would like to share the knowledge and understanding gained from the training with distinguished guests, leaders and persons of responsibility from the Women's League of Burma (WLB), our trainers, and all sisters who participated in the training. The training 'Women as Peace Builders' was held from 4th May to 6th June 2003 and was 5 weeks long.

We learned that inner peace is very important for all human beings. Many of us did not understand the essence of peacefulness, as we are all so busy struggling for ourselves, our families, our relatives, our business and organizations. As we were overwhelmed with responsibilities, we were unable to sense inner peace and this impacted on our surroundings and workplaces. Our lack of inner peace was a key factor in many of the problems in our environment. We all now understand that we have to question our ability to give genuine *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita* ²⁶ and practice the middle path. We have to assess whether giving too much is practical and beneficial for ourselves. We need to think harder and to analyze and stop accepting everything we are told.

Oppression and discrimination against women occurs not just occasionally, but to many women. This happens because of a deep rooted patriarchy in our society. This has had severe impacts on women and children and requires our careful attention. We can now see clearly how we ourselves, as women, are part of the discrimination and violence against other women. We all were programmed to accept certain behaviour and beliefs.

Last year in our first training, we learned why conflict occurs and methods for finding a resolution. This second training has provided us with new knowledge, approaches and theories, which give us a clearer picture of how all these are interrelated. This training led to us to understand the qualities needed by a mediator and provided opportunities to explore the role of a mediator in supporting and assisting people in conflict.

We have become a closely knit group, connected after sharing our heart felt feelings. The trust that we have built is precious and is one benefit from the training. We can now see our path more clearly. All of us are excited about working for peace by sharing and disseminating our new knowledge and understanding, to create a brighter future. These are the voices of our sisters who have resolved to educate for peace.

Mi Mon Nan



²⁵ *Mingalabar* is a greeting in Burmese which means 'Good day.'

²⁶ *Metta*: loving kindness, *Karuna*: compassion, *mudita*: joy for the success or prosperity of others.

METAPHOR FROM OUR HEARTS

At the end of the training each participant was asked to find something from the natural environment. A rock, a leave, a twig was used by the participants to compare their prior perceptions of themselves with their new understanding.

(1) Green Leaf

I compare my life with *this* green leaf. Seasons change - summer, the monsoon and winter - but this green leaf stays as green as ever. It gives shade and shelter for many, although it has to fall when the time comes. It has the energy to provide shelter for humans and animals. Just like this green leaf provides for others, I wish to utilise all my energy to bring peace into this life.

To peace
Mammy

(2) Strength of Grass

Grass grows naturally needing no tending. Though humans and animals pass through and step all over it, it survives and has the ability to regenerate when destroyed. Just like this grass, I will grow and survive both physically and mentally despite suffering oppression, discrimination, abuse, and belittlement. I will strive for the sake of humanity - men and women alike.

Ma Lay

(3) A Little Violet Flower amidst a Thorny Bush

I picked this little flower from amidst thorny bushes. Flowers are a metaphor of women.²⁷ Unlike others flowers, this little purple flower doesn't stand out, but it is still beautiful. This little flower has endured anger, ignorance, egoism and oppression. If a flower is empowered, then even when suppressed by a man it will still blossom beautifully and its life will be easier, enabling this little flower to find genuine peace.

Wishing to stop all violence against women
Thoo Lay Bo

(4) Like a Apple Mustard

Sometimes, others around us feel our anxiety and anger. Women peace builders should be like a ripe apple mustard fruit with a stalk so strong that the fruit won't fall easily. The stalks have the strength to bear its fruit, keeping them garden-fresh and green. We should be strong and not easily fall, so our feelings of anguish and anxiety do not affect others. Then we will be able to beautify our world.

With peace
San Nyrein Thu

²⁷ In Burma women are metaphorically referred to as flowers. Women are viewed as gentle, delicate and ornamental.

(5) Mother Earth and My Life

My mind and life are like mother earth. As mother earth accepts all of us, I now accept more easily. I can accept my feelings and this allows me to accept others.

On this mother earth, some trees and plants give life and some are poisonous. Some animals are dangerous and some useful for humans. Sometimes our behaviour upsets others; Sometimes our behaviour delights others.

Humans dig and destroy the mother earth, without her permission. As a child of mother earth, I did not give permission to be oppressed, violently abused or pushed around. Mother earth cannot refuse and must accept human destruction. Also, I must speak, act, behave, think and even eats in ways that I do not accept.

Religion has taught us that God created mother earth and humanity. I wonder if I am treated badly, because I am a child of mother earth.

Wishing to work pragmatically for peace
Anna Seng

(6) Little Flower and I

A little flower is able to give peace. It has a priceless natural quality – giving serenity, pleasure and peacefulness. May I be one, who has these qualities to bring peace to others.

Nah Shi Ve

(7) The Unattractive Ywet Hla Pann²⁸

Our feelings are like these two leaves of a *ywet hla pann*. They are naturally a dark green in colour, partially covered with different sized dots and specks, making them not particularly attractive. The first leaf has almost lost its natural green colour, due to its blemishes. When we arrived at the training our minds were almost covered with feelings and troubles. After the training we are now like the second leaf greener in colour and thicker in texture, enabling it to endure the weather. I have renamed the leaves the 'unattractive *ywet hla pann*' due to the blemishes that cloud the green. If only we could understand what makes humans so ugly...

Peacefully yours
Dolly

(8) A Little Twig

This little twig looks weak and useless, but it tolerates and accepts any little perching birds or squirrels. This little twig endures all weather - summer, the monsoon and the cold winter. It has the strength to provide a serene shelter for any

²⁸ A small evergreen shrub with colourful foliage found in the Indo-Pacific region.

living thing. It will become a natural fertilizer after its leaves turn yellow and grow old. It is useful and dutiful of its place on earth.

Rosalin

(9) Green Branch

This green branch resembles the most important thing in my life. I bring this little branch to show that no matter how modern our world, if we destroy the environment we will face the consequences. Modernity and increasing industrialization in many countries means we are like live frogs in a wok full of water, on top of a fire, bringing us to a slow death.

Peace is needed as long as the earth is here...

Ah Dee

(10) Beautiful *Pane Ywet Hla*²⁹

Colourful specks on this *pane ywet hla* leaf are disturbing, frustrating, worrying and depressing moments in the past.

Nu Nu Nge

(11) Little Jasmine Buds and Jasmine Leafs

They will blossom with lushness in the future...

Nu Nu Nge

(12) Stone

Stone can not be broken easily, but it will break if hammered many times. We have to be like stone – not easily broken, if we want to build genuine peace. We need to learn to love ourselves and be tolerant when others try to beat us down. Sometimes if we need we should just let it pass.

Nang Amy

(13) Forest Mango

Mangoes in the city have only a sweet taste. However, forest mangoes have both a sweet and sour taste. I have two tastes ego-mindedness and Buddha-mindedness. Some people like only sweetness and others only the sour taste. Sometimes, I need both tastes, when I communicate with people. Most people given a taste they don't like will become upset. I am still trying to accept and love both tastes.

Love
Seng Hurng

²⁹ *Pane Ywet Hla* is a tropical plant

(14) Challenge of a Flower

This ghostly flower looks like five fingers and some called it a *hibiscus*. I have known this flower since my childhood. Grown-ups told me that we should not wear this flower in our hair, offer it to Buddha or God, and must only be used at funerals. I just muttered to it 'poor little *hibiscus*'. However, only humans designated this meaning to the flower. It has five brave reddish coloured petals. It has yellow nectar and a stigma which attracts butterflies to pollinate the flowers. The chlorophyll in its green leaves is useful for humans. This flower has every element that a flower needs. I compare my life with this little flower. Just as this little flower survives with strength, despite belittling, I will cultivate peace even though I experience rejection and nervousness. I shall rise from amidst all oppressive people.

Non

(15) Camera

After five weeks of training I began to portray myself as a camera. When I am in a good mood, I can make people happy, just like a camera lens that captures images that will bring forth good memories. But if the camera's lens tries to capture far-away objects, we will not get the best picture. If I rush into too many things I will not be able to focus on my main aim. Firstly, I need to nourish my heart then take responsibility to do things objectively and decisively. Only then will I be able to succeed.

Kham Yard

(16) The Symbol of the *Hnin Pann*³⁰

Many consider *hnin pann* as only wild flowers growing in the forest.³¹ However, this flower is valuable and adorable. Its colour clears my mind and attracts my attention. Although *hnin panns* do not have a beautiful aroma they have their own beauty. Women are not physically strong, but we have values of our own and rights just like the flowers of the *hnin pann*.

Khet Khet Wai

(17) Guidance of a Broom

Wherever I am, at home or anywhere, I sweep the floor, if I see rubbish or feel dust and sand under my feet. A mess makes me nauseous, barely able to breathe and I become quickly depressed. I am in a good mood only when things are neat and tidy. The broom is my good friend and sweeping my habit. Once my hand reaches a broom my family and friends tease me 'Hey, here comes a *Si Bin Tharyar*!'³²

Reflection has made me realize that I have been sweeping, every, and any floor I come across, but I have never attempted to clear the rubbish-like knots in my

³⁰ The flower is from a shrub of the *Polianthes* Genus.

³¹ Wild flowers are considered less desirable as they do not need human care and attention to grow.

³² *Si Bin Tharyar* is a town or city development committee that has the responsibility to clean and clear the rubbish from the streets and roads.

heart. I think that the nature of a human is to love and protect oneself. If we are hurt by others we will hurt them back. The killing and fighting (human to human, one race to another, one country to another, one religious group to another) and the cycle of revenge is caused by too much self-love and self-protection. I love myself and become angry when someone tries to hurt me, responding with words and gestures. My main aim is to hurt the person in the way he or she has hurt me. I would proclaim that if I cannot obtain revenge today, then one day I will! My grudges, anger, ignorance and envy are not only destroying peace within, but have badly impacted on the peace of others. I realize that we will not be able to find solutions to conflicts if there are many people like me, who respond with anger and violence.

It is not sufficient to quote and cite experts, and gain knowledge from books, if we want to build peace for others, we must build peace-within ourselves. My participation in the training has allowed me to understand the difference between peace built on what others say, and what we learn from our own ways and experiences. Besides, this little broom gives me a clear understanding that I must first build peace within to build peace in a wider sense. I will therefore start sweeping away rubbish-like knots in my heart to initiate peace for others.

Mai Ja

(18) A Little Leaf and the White Flower

I was so happy to meet all our sisters at the training, though uncertain as there were many thoughts in my head. The person, who has the responsibility to oversee the peace building project for the Women's League of Burma did not feel not very peaceful. My mind was in *Dwiha*,³³ fearful of conflict, obstacles and difficulties that might arise from my responsibility.

However, after the five weeks training I realized it is important for to work from the heart, if we really want to help resolve conflict, build peace and achieve national reconciliation. I am able to use the techniques explained at the training to build 'inner peace' to reconcile and release some knots from my past. Now, my mind is as clear as this little white flower.

The training strengthened my spiritual and mental state. This is my little green leaf. It is such a small leaf, surrounded by its friends, other small leaves, its branches and stem. The deep green thick leaf reflects strength, maturity and serenity. These are qualities within me. There is room for further growth and this is an energy fueling me.

I am even more determined to work towards a peaceful, developed and just society, with the clarity of this little white flower and the strength and maturity of this little green leaf.

Khin Ohmar

(19) Water

Water has many moods. It can be bright and sparkling, reflecting the sun. It can be still and deep, calm and reflecting. I can feel the water inside me. Sometimes, salty like tears and sometimes like a deep deep well of wisdom. I choose water because all of you have taught me now to be strong like water. You face so many obstacles. So many boulders and rocks blocking your way. But like water, you never

³³ *Dwiha* is when you are in two minds about something.

stop. You keep moving, finding your way over, under, around. Slowly and slowly weaving away the stone. You keep pushing on – pushing, pushing home – like water.

Laura

(20) The Bird of Paradise

- I choose this flower, the bird of paradise, to represent my being after being part of the five week intensive peacebuilding training workshop with the great women warriors from Burma.
- The bird of paradise has a very thin, small but firm and strong stem, these are the qualities I have. The colour of its flower is very bright orange and I like that bright shining tone which I like to see myself have a very smart and clear mind.
- This flower blooms all year round and does not need much care or water. This represents the independence which I have very much since my childhood. I picked this flower that has two petals, one on each side. For me this represents compassion and wisdom, the most important spiritual qualities that help guide me live my daily life and my feminist practice.

May all being be well and in peace,
Ouyporn Khuankaew

(22) Beetle Nuts

The small seeds on the palm tree near our meeting room are my symbol of knowing more about myself during the peacebuilding training. Even though I had walked by that tree, and those branches of seeds, many times before, I had never noticed them. Auntie Leh Bweh walked by the tree one day and picked a seed that was ripe. I watched her peel a few layers and eat the bitter-sweet inside. It was only then that I realised those small seeds are very complex. Having row after row from the branches, they all look similar but they are slightly different in colour, ripeness, and size. From the outside, their dull, hard, yellow-green shells doesn't seem so interesting, but as you peel them you discover several layers of different colours, textures and tastes. The seeds has two functions : they are each one small seed among many to make up the tree, and when you taste one, you know it has a very unique purpose all its own.

I feel a bit like a seed on a palm tree. I am happy to be one among many working for peace and social change, and I love being part of many communities. The peacebuilding training gave me the opportunity to peel different layers of myself to understand more about my unique strengths and diverse identities I can share in my communities. Some of the layers of myself are hard to break through and others are gentle and soft. Building peace within helps me to use all the different parts of my personality to work for peace and justice.

Ginger