

TAKING CARE OF COMMUNITY

VILLAGE AND CLINIC OFFERINGS



A couple of houses in Laydaungkan village, near CMMC

There has been so much generosity! Thanks to your open-handedness, we were very happy to provide help and support for the villagers in the immediate vicinity of CMMC (Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre). Your dana has gone a long way, providing food, health care, and ease of travel for the entire community!

Rice Offerings

For Burmese people, rice is the most important part of every meal. If there is rice, there is *food*, and everything else is eaten as a side dish, in much smaller amounts. It's ironic that in this country (which was once called 'the rice bowl of Asia') rice is expensive, sometimes in short supply, and these days often of poor quality. Since Nargis, rice shops have been selling a lot of poor-grade rice, with the telltale yellow staining that indicates that it had been water damaged during the storm.

But for some, a reasonable amount of even this poor quality rice can be a big expense, or completely out of reach. From time to time hungry people come to the monastery from outside looking for food, and it's a heart-rending sight to see an emaciated woman standing outside the dining room in the forlorn hope that some small scrap might come her way. So we wanted to make another series of rice offerings through the monastery to the people here, to help alleviate their hunger.

In this round of offerings, we used a total of 4'700'000 Kyats (about 4275 USD) of your donations for rice dana. This provided enough rice for over 2000 households (about 10'000 people!) here in Mingaladon, and a further 100 people living near the Chanmyay





At the rice dana in CMMC

Myaing Study Monastery in Hmawbi!

After our experiences last May and July, we knew that it was very important to include as many people as possible for the rice offering. So we decided that we would give rice on a per household basis, and to include all registered households in each village (rather than offering to a restricted list of recipients as we had before). Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre sits between two villages, Kontalabaung and Laydaungkan, and Chanmyay Myaing Sayadaw worked together with the Village Headmen in both places to come up with a roster of all those who were entitled to a share of the dana. A total of 1190 households in Laydaungkan and 800 households in Kontalabaung received rice.

Last year we had given both rice and oil, but this time we only offered rice so that we could spread the dana to as many people as possible. But even with these precautions, there were still people who showed up on the day of an offering, asking that their names be added to the list. Sometimes this was oversight, and other times it was because these people were squatters, unregistered and unknown to local authorities. We learned that the news of a rice offering was enough to bring a number of these people “out of the woodwork”: the promise of free rice overcame any fear or scruples (or reluctance to pay taxes) they may have had.

We planned to give 8 viss of raw rice (a little more than 13 kg or 29 lb) per household, enough to feed a family of four for about 2 weeks. Given the number of households we were giving to, that was a lot of rice! So days before the distribution was to begin, the monastery truck began rumbling through the front gate, filled to the brim with huge bags of rice, to be divided and repackaged for distribution.



The monastery truck with bags of rice



Bags of rice - ready for distribution

Thanks to the amazing efforts of some of the lay helpers at the monastery, there was soon a wall of bags many layers deep stretching from floor to ceiling in one of the monastery buildings - each bag earmarked for one house. On the morning of the first distribution, everyone got involved in moving the bags out onto trestle tables set up next to the driveway - monks, lay helpers, and foreign yogis forming a ‘bucket brigade’ to speed up the process. As usual, Sayadaw took pains to oversee the operation himself, making sure that everything was done smoothly and properly.

And long before the dana was to begin, there already was a crowd of bikes by the side gate of the monastery, and a long line of people each with their precious token that entitled them to a share of rice - they stood in an orderly line, eager and alert, waiting for their chance to come forward.



A happy woman with her token



Eagerly waiting to get their share of rice

Once the offering began, they presented themselves to the table, had their names checked against the master list, and came to receive their rice.

On the giving end, it was a blur of activity (and better than a work-out at the gym!) as we hoisted bag after bag of rice on heads (for women and children) or shoulders (for men) of people coming one after the other in quick succession. Many of us took turns offering - including donors, foreign and Burmese yogis, helpers, and resident nuns. We all worked in pairs, and when someone became tired, another

person would quickly come in to relieve them. It was a true group effort!



Daw Virañani, Narayan, Mimmi, Carol, Daw Ariya Ñani: ready to distribute the bags of rice ... and distributing hundreds of rice-bags!



We were sometimes amazed at the strength and resilience of people - little kids and even ancient ladies were cheerfully taking the heavy bags of rice on their heads and trotting back home - sometimes carrying not only their own allotment, but the neighbour's portion, too! If their knees dipped a bit when the rice was first placed on their heads, there was only surprise or laughter while they straightened up and went on their way. And those who really needed help invariably got it.



While all this was happening, we were struck by the amazing support that had come together to help those in need: there had been so much generosity, and so many beings were helping to make this happen! We couldn't help but feel grateful - to each of you who had donated money, to Sayadaw and all the helpers at the monastery, and the many beings who had offered or were offering assistance, often without our knowledge. In the moment, the world felt like a very small and intimate community!

The rice offerings for the communities around CMMC were done over 5 days, on some days both in morning and then later in the afternoon. The last offering was in February, scheduled to coincide with the first birthday gala for the Aye Metta Ayu Dana Medical Clinic; a most fitting way to celebrate, since there had also been a rice offering on its opening day last year (this also guaranteed a large audience for the proceedings!).



The 1 viss measures are filled...

We also offered rice for villagers (in 100 households) living near Chanmyay Myaing Study Monastery in Hmawbi. This offering was organized so that people brought their own containers or bags for the rice; these we filled from open piles of rice, dipping and leveling large 1 viss measures. At Hmawbi, we noticed some people who had nothing to carry their rice home in but a worn longyi or jacket - too poor to own a bucket or even a used rice bag! Often, these were elderly and I wondered what their stories were, perhaps of a life without children or relatives to provide care or security.



... Daw Virañani offering rice



...Mimmi handing out rice and ...

men or women, coming to an end

Both here and in Hmawbi, it was wonderful to see all the rice being carried away, knowing that in many cases it would be used immediately!

The morning after the first two rice offerings at CMMC, there was a beautiful thing that happened. A foreign yogi (who had ordained as a monk) told us that when he and the other monks went out on alms round, they encountered many more people than usual, and a real sense of connection. Women, men, and children were out by the side of the road in their bare feet waiting for the monks to come - sometimes with only a little rice, but so very happy because now they had something they could give! For even the poorest people here, dana (the practice of generosity) is a high priority!

Village Assistance



The village road - work in progress

a fine layer of red dust on every horizontal surface. I have brick walls and glass windows - but the people living in the porous bamboo huts by the street have it much worse, an endless dust-bath. They have no choice but to breathe the dust, and eat it - except in the rainy season where it becomes a source of skin diseases and parasites.

So an upgraded road is more than a convenience, but also a gift of health, ease, and well-being to hundreds of people. So it was an easy choice to make, and we offered 1'000'000 Kyats towards the completion of the project.

Here such things are done with man-power, rather than machine, and so the improvements will be done in stages. For several days in late February, men were lugging clay from the edge of a nearby pond to build up the road where it meets the main highway. What could have been done in a few hours with a bulldozer took days of back-breaking labor in the hot sun. Now the local foot, bike, and car traffic is doing the work of a steamroller - leveling and flattening it so that pavement can be put down when it becomes completely hardened by the hot-season sun. Eventually, there will be two strips of pavement on either side of the road, axle width apart - suitable for one car, or two lanes of bike and foot-traffic. Unlike rice, which is the most impermanent of offerings, this dana will keep on giving for quite a while to come!

In addition to the rice offerings to the local villagers, there were a few additional projects that came to our attention that we felt were worthy of funding. So we offered a further 1'100'150 Kyats (about 1000 USD) and 30 USD for these projects.

The Headman of Laydaungkan village told us that he wanted to improve the road next to the monastery with partial paving so that it would be more passable. We couldn't have agreed more. Having trudged up and down this road a number of times on our way to the nunneries, we knew just how bad it was - and at all times of the year. In the rainy season, it is ankle deep in slick mud, or flooded from one side to the other with running water. In the dry time of the year, the mud changes to a deep powdery dust that engulfs the foot with a soft 'ppffft' at each step.

The mud and dust are not only inconveniences but real health problems, especially for those who live right next to the road. Even further away, it is a nuisance - now as I write this a hot wind is blowing through the window, and each day it deposits

We also responded to request for help that came through the monastery - from one of our neighbours behind the foreigner's building. Until quite recently there was a group of about 17 houses clustered around a duck pond, with all the vibrancy of a little neighbourhood. There were kids playing and learning their lessons, moms cooking and washing, dads and granddads sitting on the porches chatting - plus a video hut and all manner of animals (including a couple of sows who had a palatial bamboo sty built over the nearby stream). In January the landowner sold the land (to CMMC), and so everyone had to move. And in Myanmar, 'moving house' literally means exactly that. It is common for people here to rent land but own their houses - so when they move, everything goes, house and all! One of our neighbours was in a 'tight spot' and could not afford to move his house, so we were happy to be able to give him a little help to ease the transition - the equivalent of about 40 USD for house moving and another 8 USD for roofing.

The Aye Metta Ayu Dana Clinic



The clinic at the opening ceremony (Feb 08) before it was badly damaged by cyclone Nargis

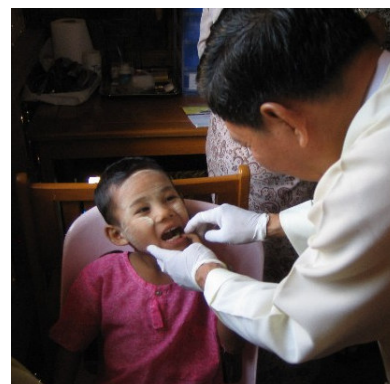


Bustling activity in front of the new clinic building (Feb 09)

Now just a little over a year old, the Metta Clinic at CMMC has already become an established and important part of the local scene, providing free medical care (on Saturdays) and dental care (on Sundays) to anyone who needs it. The number of patients coming to the clinic began to increase dramatically after cyclone Nargis, and now it is not unusual for over 150 people to show up for medical care each Saturday, and over 80 may come to see the dentists on Sunday. In its first year of operation, over 7300 patients have received treatment at the clinic.

A lot of the people who live in the villages around here have come from upper Burma, finding work in the growing number of factories that have sprung up in the outskirts of Yangon. Most of these workers are minimally paid, and they may live in extreme poverty - far away from their traditional village safety nets of community and family. It is on the clinic day at the Metta Clinic that the scale of the struggle begins to show, one personal story at a time.

One of the most beautiful things about the clinic is that almost all of the doctors and dentists who come to work here each weekend offer their services free of charge. And many are on 'government service' - meaning that they are obliged to work six days a week with very little time off. But they still come to work here happily on their one free day, saying very humbly, "Ke sa ma shi ba bu." - "It is nothing,"; a sign of the high value that Burmese culture puts on generosity and service.



Dr. Sein Shwe is treating a little patient

Last July, the Metta Clinic was an integral part of our dana offering. In this round of donations, we again wanted to recognize and support the important work that the clinic does each weekend. Knowing the growing expenses of the clinic (inflation is high in Myanmar!), our first priority was to give 1'000'000 Kyats (about 1000 USD) to the general operations account.



In the waiting area of the old clinic

And this time, because of your amazing generosity, we had the happy luxury of being able to support special projects that were not yet funded. So after asking the clinic staff about their current needs, we chose to offer a further 1'000'000 Kyats to an Emergency Care Fund. Every week a few patients come with serious or life-threatening conditions who need immediate referral to a hospital, as the clinic cannot provide anything more than basic primary care. On a given Saturday, usually there is one such case, and sometimes as many as four or five. So we wanted to guarantee that these people could have their expenses covered, and your dana has made that possible!

We also donated a further 110'000 Kyats (100 USD) and 800 € to the clinic without stipulation, to be used on an as-needed basis for any and all expenses.

So your donations will be used to relieve the suffering of many beings! It is hard for us (as middle-class Westerners) to imagine life without regular visits to the dentist and GP - but a surprising number of the people that come through the clinic have never had their teeth checked, or had regular medical check-ups - they simply can't afford it! So even basic and routine care is received with immense gratitude - gratitude that we wish you could all receive directly!



A doctor is treating a child suffering from eczema

But a story will have to do: One Sunday I was approached by an elderly (here that means anything over 50!) Burmese nun who thanked me profusely, pointing to a gap in her mouth where an



infected molar had just been removed. This was no small thing for her, to be relieved of the pain of a chronic abscess - and this care was something she could never have paid for with the meager alms that nuns receive. It didn't matter that I wasn't personally responsible for the clinic's presence - she simply wanted to express her thanks to a foreigner, any foreigner - knowing that without us, the clinics would not exist.

So her blessing and her thanks go through us to you:

"May your generosity be a cause and condition for health and happiness, and may you become liberated from all suffering in the shortest possible time. Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu!!!"

With metta
Virañani