

HOME - SWEET HOME !



In which house would YOU prefer to live?

Food, shelter, clothes, and medicine are the four basic requisites that human beings need. In regard to shelter, this can range from a cave or a very simple hut to a huge mansion or palace. In Burma like elsewhere on this planet, some people cannot even afford a simple but decent hut or house to live in. Their dilapidated bamboo hut is barely standing straight and in many places fixed with plastic sheets, if at all. We have seen houses that were completely open on at least one side, if not on two or three sides.

Right after Cyclone Nargis which caused so much damage in May 2008 we helped people fix or rebuild their houses in the neighbourhood of the Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre (CMMC) in Yangon. Knowing that many of these people live in great poverty we asked the residential monks of CMMC whether they had seen houses on their daily alms round that were on the verge of collapsing or in very bad shape. And - of course! - they said that there were a number of houses that would need repair or even rebuilding.



U Sein Win and his family in front of their new house

On January 8 we followed the monks on their alms round through the village of Laydaungkan which is situated to the south-east of CMMC. The Venerables Suvira and Khema pointed out the houses they had noticed to be in very bad shape. We quickly took some notes, writing down the name of the person who happened to be at home at that time. In the afternoon, we went to a cluster of houses which belong to the village of Kontalabaung situated to the north-west of CMMC. We were told by U Sein Win, a construction worker at CMMC, that quite a number of houses were in extremely poor conditions - including his house. It turned out that we were going to build six new houses over there!

On the following day we did the same round with Venerable Khema and U Mya Thaung. U Mya Thaung is a carpenter and presently also works on the construction site at CMMC. We indicated the houses and asked U Mya Thaung whether the house could be repaired or whether it had to be completely rebuilt. With his expertise of repairing and building houses over many years, he could give us reliable estimates on the spot. In return, we also made the decisions right then and there. At the end of the inspection round, we had decided that we were going to repair 6 houses and replace 7 houses.

Venerable Khema had happily volunteered to oversee the whole project and U Mya Thaung had agreed not only to organize the necessary workers but also to help build himself. We told them that they could start as soon as they were ready.



U Mya Thaung is checking the progress of the construction work



Building materials

The next morning Venerable Khema came to tell us that the building materials were already being delivered to the cluster of houses in Kontalabaung! We could not believe it. „How in the world is this possible?“ Well, in Burma such nice surprises are possible and happen every now and again.

Venerable Khema told us that in the late afternoon of the previous day he went out to measure the old houses and then ordered the materials for building

the new ones in a nearby shop in Kontalabaung. As he knew the owner of the shop he got the bamboo poles, bamboo mats, and palm-leaf mats without having to pay for these materials. The owner trusted that we would pay for it later.



Building materials

Around nine o'clock we walked over to Kontalabaung and were delighted to see the activities that were already happening. Not only were all the building materials there but the workers had already started to dismantle the house of Ma Soe Soe Hlaing. Later in the morning they started to work on a couple of other houses.

Happy to know that these families soon would be able to live in a decent bamboo house we went back to the centre. However, in the afternoon, we started to worry. Unexpectedly and completely out of season it started to rain! In the late afternoon and in the evening, it rained quite heavily. „Oh, the poor families! We hope that their houses have been finished and

that they will stay dry! Or at least that they can go to their neighbours for the night.“

The next day we learned that our worries were unfounded because the men worked very hard during the rain in order to finish the houses. So, all the three families could spend the first night in their new home perfectly sheltered from the heavy downpour. Given the condition of



Workers dismantle the house of Ma Soe Soe Hlaing



Ma Soe Soe Hlaing and her husband in front of their new home

their old homes they definitely would have been less comfortable during that night.

Ma Soe Soe Hlaing (28 years old) and her husband, Ko Than Naing Oo (30 years old), are originally from Saketa which is a township in the south-east of Yangon. Their roof and some walls were in bad shape and needed to be replaced. Ko Than Naing Oo makes a living by collecting and selling rubbish. This is just enough to buy food every day. When the two of them posed for the pictures, they were obviously proud of and happy with their fixed home. After that Ma Soe Soe Hlaing came up to me and shyly said, „Thank you for repairing our house.“



Inside of Daw Wain's 'open-air' home with their few belongings

Like Ma Soe Soe Hlaing and her husband, many people come to Yangon from all different parts of Burma in order to find work. They usually rent a plot of land on which they must then build a house on their own expense. The landlord only provides the land, everything else needs to be done or organized by the people who want to live there. This means that they must pay for the construction of a house as well as for the ongoing repairs. A thatched roof only lasts for one year, then it must be replaced. Walls consisting of woven bamboo mats usually last for about four to five years.

One of the houses had only two walls, on two sides their home was open. It was the home of Daw Wain, two other

women, and a young girl. They sell fried cakes to make a living and support each other. As they live without a man in their house, they were dreaming of having walls on all four sides of the building. In this way, they would not be so exposed and feel more protected and secure. Although they are very poor and live a very basic life, their home was kept extremely neat and tidy. The few belongings such as blankets, pillows, mosquito nets, or cooking utensils were spotlessly clean and neatly arranged or folded.



Fixing the new walls at Daw Wain's home



The 'Ladies-Home' - Daw Wain is in the middle behind the girl

During the three days of repairing and building the houses, Venerable Khema spent almost all day over there to oversee the work. On the first day, he was so much engaged in his 'job' that he forgot the time for lunch. As it was already too late to go over to the centre, the wife of U Sein Win offered him rice, fried eggs, and some lapet (a typical Burmese snack made of fermented tea leaves and served with fried beans, peanuts, and garlic). Venerable Khema said that he not only enjoyed the simple lunch but that he actually really liked doing this 'job.' He explained that previously he had been doing such things in his village. He obviously had a great time as the 'project manager' and he certainly did a very good and efficient job!

In the late afternoon of January 12 we were asked to 'inspect' all the houses that had been either repaired or newly built. It was such a delight to see so many happy and joyful faces. For at least another year these people will not need to worry about their homes because now they have safe and sturdy bamboo houses to live in. They also know that during the rainy season the roofs will not be leaking. The atmosphere in the cluster of houses was joyful, even the neighbours were obviously happy about the 'upgrade' of the dilapidated houses. After we had inspected all the houses, we distributed wafers to all the kids to let everybody be part of the prevailing joy.

With his 'manager skills' Venerable Khema had already sorted out how much building materials was needed to repair or build the houses in the village of Laydaungkan. In the course of January 12, the bamboo poles, woven bamboo mats, and leaf mats were brought over to the houses in Laydaungkan. Once the workers had finished the houses in Kontalabaung, they immediately started on the other houses.

Daw Se Se Myint was beaming with joy when we visited her and her family in their new home. She said that for many years she had been dreaming to live in such a nice little house! When we met her first, she lived in a bamboo shack that was definitely not going to last for much longer. She invited us to come inside the house and sit down. But there was barely space to sit down. I wondered how a family of three (the parents and a 14-year-old son) could sleep in such a narrow space. She proudly showed us the little bell that she used when she was selling ice-cream.

In Burma, many people make a living by walking around in the streets and selling anything from fried foods, brooms, or ice-cream to blouses or scrubbing brushes.



Daw Se Se Myint's old home

But, as she explained, three years ago she had to stop selling ice-cream due to ill-health. Among the things lying in the corner of the hut, she grabbed a little green booklet. It was the patient booklet of the Metta Clinic at CMMC (one of the projects that Metta In Action supports). On the one hand we were sad to hear that she could no longer earn money for her family. But on the other hand we were glad to know that she got free medical treatment at the Metta Clinic.

Her husband earns a meager wage as a worker in the little fields nearby. Of course, this is not enough to feed and support a family of three.

When the landlord realized that her house would be rebuilt, he kicked the family out - without warning. They were incredibly lucky because on the same day they found a piece of land not far from their old place where they were allowed to build a new house.



Venerable Khema - the project manager!



Daw Se Se Myint's 'dream-house'



The daughter: Ma Khin Than Nwe



With Daw Mya Hlaing, her three younger kids, and kids from the neighbourhood



The mother: Daw Mya Hlaing in her little stall

When Daw Mya Hlaing's husband died in February of 2010, the whole family's life changed dramatically. The eldest daughter, Ma Khin Than Nwe, was just about to finish her final year of high-school. She was dreaming of going to university and study arts. Her dreams were well founded as she was a bright and intelligent student. Because the family lost the main source of income with the death of their father, Ma Khin Than Nwe had to leave school and work in a nearby factory. Her

mother earned money by selling fried foods at the market and in front of her house in the afternoons. She got some additional money from washing clothes. With the money that the two of them earned, they could send the three younger kids to school, buy enough food, and gradually pay back the debt. The husband had been an alcoholic and finally died of liver cancer. The family had first sold a piece of land and then borrowed some additional money to pay for his treatment. With this unexpected turn of events, Ma Khin Than Nwe had to burry her plans of finishing high-school and then going to university. A couple of neighbours confirmed the fact that she was very smart indeed.



Their old home ...

When we asked her if she would like to continue school and maybe go to university she almost did not dare to answer because this possibility did no longer seem to exist for her. Finally, a very shy 'yes' emerged from her mouth. Great was the joy for the mother and daughter when they heard that we were going to support not only her education but also the family. It was obvious that the mother's income alone would not be enough to care for the whole family. On top of this, we bought a new bicycle for Ma Khin Than Nwe so that she can easily attend the necessary additional tuition.



... and their new home (not yet completed)



U Pi Nan and Daw Nan Aye Kyi: overjoyed with their new home

When a helper of the centre took us to the house of U Pi Nan (71 years old) and Daw Nan Aye Kyi (74 years old), they were living in a tiny little bamboo house. We very quickly realized and learned that the wife is almost deaf and that the husband's eye sight is very poor, although he had cataract operations on both eyes. They have a son, but he is not supporting his parents as is custom here in Burma. Usually, the ageing parents are supported by and taken care of by their children because there are almost no social institutions for elderly and/or sick people.

What we noticed immediately was the fact that they keep their hut and little garden impeccably clean! Daw Nan Aye Kyi earns a little bit of money by selling plants at the market. On small patches around the house she has planted 'evergreens.' U Pi Nan has no way of making an income due to his poor eye sight, and so he stays at home while his wife carries the plants, a bucket, a basket, and a canister to the market in the hope of getting enough money to buy food.



Daw Nan Aye Kyi on the way to the market

We not only saw that the house was in very bad shape but we also came to know that they were not able to pay the rent for the land since September of last year. While we were inspecting their hut and garden, several neighbours came over. We also talked to them and it turned out that they often offer some curries or other kinds of food to the old couple. Above all, they love granny and grandpa as if they were their own parents or grandparents. We were touched to see that the old couple could count on the solidarity of their neighbours. We only feared that if they could no longer pay the rent for the land, the landlord would kick them out soon. We did not dare to imagine what would happen to the old couple in a new place where nobody would know them. We decided not only to build a new sturdy bamboo hut for them but also to pay the rent for one year. This included to pay back the debt and to pay the monthly rent until September of this year.

When we inspected their new home, U Pi Nan could not restrain his joy and he started to dance. What a sight! He then took a guitar-like instrument and played some classical Burmese music. There was so much life and joy in his music.

Not far from the old couple lives Daw Hla Shwe. Her name means „Mrs. Beautiful Gold.“ She lives with her younger sister, Ma Sanyama, who must have burnt her throat as the scars are still clearly visible. Her sister has two kids, one is just three months old and the other is six years old. The two sisters have to raise the children alone because the father of the kids had died. They try to survive by washing other peoples' clothes. It was heartbreaking to see them stuck in poverty and to know that the children's fate will not be much different due to lack of education. Their house was built in the back of a compound with many houses. To me it seemed as if they were 'outcasts,' not being tolerated in the community of this cluster of houses. It was obvious



Daw Hla Shwe and Ma Sanyama in their shanty home

that they needed a new bamboo house and when Venerable Khema and U Mya Thaung discussed the issue they came forth with a wonderful idea. They said that they could build the new house on an empty spot of land within the same compound, in a place which was more 'central.' This seemed to be no problem as long as they would pay the 5000 kyats per month for renting the piece of land. For the landlord it does not really matter in which segment of their property people build their houses. The main thing for them is to get the money, the rest can be figured out by the people living there and renting the plot of land.

As I put this update together, more than two months have passed since these houses had been rebuilt or repaired. This project has once again brought up an increased awareness and gratitude of how fortunate I am to live in a solid brick building here at the meditation centre, complete with electricity and running water (well, at least most of the time) - a place in which I am sheltered from the influences of the weather and protected from flying and creeping creatures. May all living beings be able to live in a suitable home and be protected from outer and inner harm.

With metta
Ariya Ñani



The old couple's new house



A very happy Ma Sanyama is posing with her baby in front of their new home