

SOLAR POWER IN RURAL BURMA



*In front of the library - with the four solar panels on the roof
From left to right: U Zaw Myo Thet, Carol, Narayan, Marjo, Ven. Ariya Ñani,
Ven. Virañani, U Zaw Lin Tun*

What we had hoped to happen has come true: the village of Thaleba has become a shining example for using environmentally-friendly technology! Four solar panels produce enough electricity to light the school, the newly established library, the two main roads, and the two pagodas.

Already on the day after the opening ceremony, people from the neighbouring villages came on motorbikes to inspect and find out about this modern - and for them strange - form of producing electricity.

And at the end of February we heard that several Burmese weekly magazines contain articles about the installation of solar power in Thaleba. Being eager to read what they say, we managed to get copies of some of these magazines. It seems that the company which installed the solar panels made the information public – of course, this is a cheap form of advertisement for them. But nevertheless, it will raise peoples' awareness of the availability, feasibility, and benefit of solar power.

In one of these articles, it says:

“This project was carried out under the leadership of Chanmyay Myaing Sayadaw [who is a native of Thaleba village and now resides in the Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre in Yangon]. A special feature of this project is the active support of the villagers. They made the lamp posts and put them up in the designated places.”



A bullock-cart on the main road passing a lamp post

The idea of offering solar power to Thaleba was born last year when we got a request from the village head. In a formally written letter, he asked if we could offer a generator for the people in Thaleba. He explained that it would be used in houses where a person had died. As it is tradition in rural Burma, the family of a deceased person has to offer food and drinks to everybody who comes to the house in order to pay his or her final respect to the deceased person. To cook big quantities of food and to entertain the guests is a great challenge in a place without electricity and easily causes an additional form of stress and discomfort for the family. Therefore, to have a generator for producing electricity was a strong wish of many families in Thaleba. The families of the deceased would then be able to 'rent' the generator for three or four days until all the formalities would be over.

We understood the plight of the village head and the desire of the people, but we were more than reluctant to offer a generator – a generator which produces noise, fumes, and consumes big quantities of expensive fuel. We politely declined to fulfil their wish for a generator.

But this decision bore another fruit: the idea of offering solar power. With this, we reflected, not only a few particular families would temporarily benefit, but all the people in the whole village could enjoy long-term benefits.

We mentioned the idea to Chanmyay Myaing Sayadaw who was immediately taken by this idea and showed a lot of interest in implementing it. However, the village head was not at all impressed by or interested in this project. He simply wanted a generator for his people in the village – this is what he had seen before and so he knew that it would work.

Chanmyay Myaing Sayadaw is always interested in new and modern gadgets had his people investigate this issue. They found a company in Yangon that was selling solar panels and even offered technical support for the installation of the solar panels, inverters, batteries, and controllers in the village.

Consequently, more information was gathered and plans made. It was decided that there should be enough electricity for the school, the library, the two main roads, and the two pagodas. In the case when a family needed light in their house to accommodate the visitors after the death of a family member, the use of a 'temporary power line' could be obtained.



The four solar panels on the roof of the library



The bridge over the Mu River

In the afternoon of January 23, we travelled to Thaleba from Mandalay. Our group included: Chanmyay Myaing Sayadaw, Venerable Suvira, Ven. Virañani, Marjo, Carol, Narayan, Mimmi, and myself. The sun was already quite low when we crossed the bridge over the Mu River. Some of you might remember that a couple of years ago Marjo and Ite made a big contribution for it to be completed. Without the bridge, the drive to Thaleba would have been two hours longer – and many times more tiring.



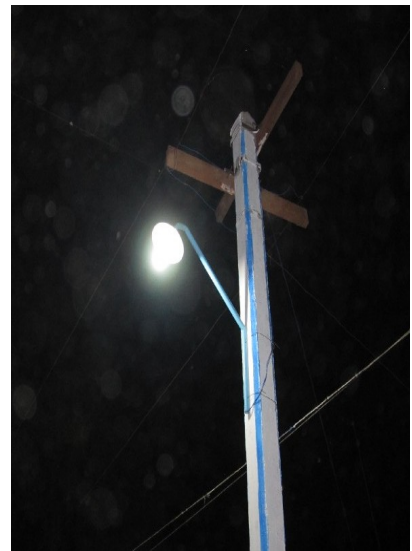
The ribbon is cut - the balloons rise into the sky...

We got out of the car before the bridge and walked over it. On the other side of the river we were greeted by the village people who lined the road all the way to the school! What a sight! Men and women, kids and grandmas, teachers and farmers, they all stood by the side of the road and welcomed us heartedly. Some women had brought little bunches of auspicious leaves or flowers which they happily offered to us.

I was deeply touched by their visible presence and heartfelt welcome. It showed deep appreciation and gratitude for what we were going to offer to them. This was a form with which they could express their gratitude and joy of getting electricity in the village.

Two local authorities had been invited for the 'opening ceremony' of the solar power: Colonel Khin Maung Than and U Thein Win (a representative of the Ayadaw township). Village girls in their best clothes hold a ribbon which was cut right at the time when dusk set in. The balloons fixed to the ribbon rose up into the twilight of a clear and sunny day. Simultaneously, the switch was turned on and the lights in the street went on – a joyful OHHHH went through the crowd. For the very first time in Thaleba, the two main roads were lighted.

All the students from the school were invited to have supper: a delicious vermicelli soup. It was a great delight and joy to see them eating, some of them had even two bowls of soup – they definitely liked it very much.



... and the lights are on



U Chit Sein (83-years-old) waiting for the health check-up in the school yard

The next offering happened the following morning: all the old folks who are eligible to be supported by the 'Health Fund for Elders' got a medical check up. The village doctor, Dr. Min Lwin, and a young doctor who is a native of Thaleba examined 38 grandmothers and grandfathers. They were given the necessary treatment and/or medication.

When everybody had been examined, we offered each of them a bag of rice (about 20 kg), a bottle of vitamins, a 1.5-liter bottle of oil, and five mandarin oranges.

Finally, the old folks and their accompanying person could go

for a sumptuous lunch. Some of these old people needed the support of their daughter or son to walk or even to be carried. They too, enjoyed the feast and then happily went back to their homes.



Daw Thaung Kywe with a bag of rice, a bottle of oil, and a bottle of vitamins



The old folks at lunch

We made an additional donation for the 'Health Fund for Elders' so that more old people can profit from it.

Dr. Min Lwin presented us a neat little booklet in which he had written down how he used the money we gave him last year. We had given him some money which he could use to treat very poor people for free. On the first page he wrote, "Auspiciousness to you all, Sayadaw and members of Metta In Action! I extend my thanks for the cordial donation I received on 31st January 2010."

He treated eleven patients, among which were an old bedridden monk and a baby girl. The old monk

suffered from general debility and multiple sores, while the baby girl was afflicted with frequent fever. U Po, a 52-year-old farmer, was bitten by a viper (which is not uncommon in that area of Burma). Dr. Min Lwin found him in a serious condition because the viper venom had already caused kidney failure and some brain damage. But Dr. Min Lwin could revive him. In his words, "This patient will be a remarkable milestone in my life. I took great pride in saving this patient through my well-trained experience."

In the afternoon, we were taken out for a bullock-cart ride to the fields. The ride turned out not only to be very bumpy but also to be very dusty! The village of Thaleba is surrounded by a vast expanse of fields, except on the eastern side where the Mu River marks the boundary to the village of Kyaugone. We stopped at different places to inspect the fields: (at the end of January) there were fields with wheat, yellow beans, peanuts, tomatoes, water melons, betel leaves, corn, and sunflowers.



On the way to the fields...

We noticed that the branches of some trees at the edge of the fields had been cut. We learned that they use the leaves as fodder for the animals. But they also need wood for cooking. We had already spoken to Sayadaw about offering trees to replace those that had been used for firewood, and so when we learned this, we brought the subject up again. When they heard that we wanted to offer trees, they were delighted. However, their priority for planting trees was not 'out there in the fields,' but they wanted to plant trees on the premises of the two pagodas in Thaleba. The trees, they explained, would give shade and coolness to everybody coming to pay their respect at the pagoda.



The Sutaung Pyet Pagoda in Thaleba

Before we left Thaleba we made two more small donations: one was to buy books and magazines for the library, the other one was to get brown sashes for the kids of the daily 'chanting group.' U Kyi Hlaing is the father of one of the residential monks at CMMC. He has a group of about 25 kids who come to the Nagayone Pagoda every day in the late afternoon. He teaches them the basic Buddhist recitations that are chanted in many peoples' homes throughout Burma.

When Burmese people go to a monastery or meditation centre, women usually wear a sash over their left shoulder. They also do so when paying homage to a pagoda, Buddha statue, monk, or nun. In the many meditation centres throughout Burma, the meditators usually wear a brown sash. U Kyi Hlaing had asked us last year to offer sashes to the kids of his chanting group so that they would have an outer sign of 'belonging' to this particular group. He was very pleased and delighted when we offered these sashes.

The newly established library greatly profits from the solar-powered electricity because now it can be open until 9 pm. Most of the people in Thaleba are farmers and they usually work out in their fields all day long. They come back to their homes in the late afternoon before it gets dark. Before, when they had no electricity in the village, they could not do much after it was getting dark which is around 6 pm. To walk around in the dark and dusty roads of the village was dangerous. The danger did not come from robbers and gangs but from the highly venomous vipers and other biting creatures. Now, they not only can walk safely to the pagoda or the library in the evenings, but they also can read books and magazines in the library.



A teacher and students are welcoming us to Thaleba

From the school teachers we learned that this year because of the solar power they would now be able offer the nightly tuition for free since the students will not need to pay for the use of the generator. In Burma, the school year finishes in March with the annual examinations. Especially for the examinations at the high-school level the students are dependent on additional teachings and training that this tuition provides.

From our previous visits to Thaleba we knew that there are some children in the village who do not go to school. To benefit these children and their families specifically and the community in general, we brought this issue to the attention of Chanmyay Myaing Sayadaw and asked if an „Education Fund“ could be set up. Sayadaw was very enthusiastic about this idea and in almost no time the necessary data was gathered and the fund set up. It turned out that there were not only a few kids unable to attend school, but sixty-one altogether! The majority (55 children) will

go to primary school (1st to 4th standard), four will attend middle school (5th to 8th standard), one will attend 9th standard, and one will attend 10th standard, the final level before entering university.

The Venerable Sujana, a native of Thaleba, will be in charge of the „Education Fund.“ Because his parents were so poor, he could no longer attend classes after primary school. He was a bright young kid eager to learn. Under great hardships and with a lot of struggling and determination he managed to finish high-school and then study at the university. He graduated with a degree in library science. Later he ordained as a monk. When Sayadaw asked him to be in charge of the „Education Fund,“ he was very happy to do it because he personally knows what it means to be deprived of education.

For me it has been the fourth time in Thaleba and it felt like going back to a very familiar and well known place. The school is not far from the river and each time I was there, we would make a little stroll to the river after breakfast. At that time of the day, the women come with their earthen pots and fetch drinking water for their families. They wade into the water, rinse the pot, and fill it with water.



A woman getting water at the Mu River



Early morning at the Mu River

Then they pull it towards the shore, and still standing in the shallow water they lift it up onto their heads. Often they come in groups of two or three women, so then they can help each other lift the heavy pots on their heads. But once the pot is put on the head, they gracefully walk up the steep slope and back to their homes.

On such mornings there is usually an atmosphere of calm and peace. The waters of the river silently flow downstream as the day slowly grows older. There might be the occasional call of a bird or the sound of a bullock-cart passing

over the nearby bridge. Life seems to be embedded in the natural rhythm of the day. There is the proper time to fetch water, and there is the proper time to go and work in the fields. There is the proper time to cook the meals, and there is the proper time for bathing.

In the afternoons, the bank of the river becomes very lively with people taking a bath and washing their clothes in the river. Young lads splash in the water and make jokes while mothers wash big heaps of clothes. Washing - both one's own body and one's clothes - is not only a public activity in Burma but also a very social one!

After two days we left Thaleba, filled with joy, delight, and many unforgettable memories. With this update, I try to let you be part of these – YOUR – donations. Without the ongoing and generous support of all of you we (that is the „Metta In Action“ group) would not be able to carry out anything. It is with great appreciation and gratitude to each of you that I have put together this update.

With metta, Ariya Ñani



*An enjoyable and cool morning stroll to the Sutaung Pyet Pagoda.
From left to right: Mimmi, Venerables Ariya Ñani and Virañani, Marjo,
Carol, and Narayan*