

Metta In Action Update—October 2014 (1)

## *A Steep Learning Curve*

(Community Support—Yangon and Mingaladon)



### **An Important Message our Metta In Action Friends**

Myanmar is racing to catch up with the rest of the world after decades of profound isolation from the global community. This has been much in the news in the last several years. But recently the country has been in the media spotlight for less welcome reasons.

Stories in major Western media have described inter-religious violence encouraged by certain monks (particularly the charismatic leader of the so-called ‘696 movement,’ Ashin Wirathu), and how the Rohingya people in the Western Rakkhine State are being denied basic human rights, access to medicine, food, and other basic necessities, as well as being subjected to hatred and systematic attacks.

We at Metta In Action are as appalled by what is happening as you are, and so we want you to know that we take care not to support those who participate or condone violence against non-

Buddhist ethnic and religious groups. What we know in our hearts from our decades-long relationships with people in Burma is that the situation is much more nuanced and complicated than is often painted by even ‘in depth’ coverage by the Western media.



*A village grandmother walks her granddaughter to school*

What the headlines and the more dramatic stories miss is that the violence and hatred are not universal. Most Burmese people (of all faiths—men, women, children, lay and monastic, city dwellers and country folk) are simply doing the best they can to get on with their lives, with dignity and sometimes quiet desperation. And they are coping with an avalanche of economic and cultural change that has overtaken this beautiful country in a very short period of time.

So the magnitude of suffering amongst ordinary people is staggering. There is a lot of confusion and there is often hopelessness. It is *this* suffering we see, and with your dāna it is *this* suffering that we are all doing something to help alleviate.

One of the hallmarks of the work we do—and what makes it so special—is that it is based on personal relationships: we know the people we support, and we know that they are working for the general good regardless of race or ethnicity. Many of the people who benefit from your dāna are providing essential community support: health care, education, and homes for orphaned and poor girls. It is a great privilege to be able to help these remarkable women and men so that they can continue to work tirelessly for the betterment and well-being of all beings.

So as you read the upcoming updates about our 2014 offerings—or yet another story in the news about ethnic strife in Burma, please know that Metta In Action—and you—are making a difference in this part of world, with care and attention to the values that matter to all of us. As our next cycle of donations comes rapidly closer, we first want to bring you up to date about what we did this year, beginning with our donations to communities and individuals.

### **Six Years On—The Cyclone’s Children**

We did not realize we were starting something six years ago when we made our first donations after cyclone Nargis—we were just acting in the face of immediate need. This January, a trip we took across the Hlaing River from Yangon showed just how much has changed since then, and just how much is no different at all. I remembered this area very well, as we had driven through it in September of 2008, on our way to offer food to some communities in the Irrawaddy Delta. As we had come across the river,



*The Irrawaddy Division near Yangon in 2008...*





*...and the cityscape that is encroaching on it.*

the soft predawn light touched rice fields and hamlets of bamboo dwellings, with the occasional monastery with its walled enclosure.

This year, as we crossed the river, I was astounded to see a completely transformed landscape. The rice fields and clusters of bamboo houses on stilts had vanished under actively growing urban sprawl, replaced by factories, housing developments, and concrete buildings. In the midst of all this was our destination--a monastery that in six years had morphed from a simple village temple into an

orphanage, a school, a community health centre—and a lifeline for thousands of people whose lives had been torn apart by the storm.

We had learned of Aung Zayar Min Orphan Welfare Monastery through Daw Ñanadasi, the nun in charge of the office at Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre (CMMC), who for quite a long time had wanted us to visit the place. She had told us it was big, but it wasn't simply big--it was *giant*-sized, essentially a small town unto itself.

On our way in, we met two young women, Khay Thwe Hline and Ei Pyu Win, who were very happy to show us around. They had been orphaned in the storm, and had lived at the monastery ever since—now they were in their last year of school. They showed us the ground floor of one of the girls' hostels, and introduced us



*Khay Thwe Hline and Ei Pyu Win*



*"What is your name? What country do you come from? How old are you?"*

to some of the many kids who had found refuge here after the cyclone.

The hostel was crowded, but the girls who lived there were very friendly and bright. A few of them spoke decent English, and though at first they were a little shy they also were eager to pepper us with the few questions they knew. A number of the girls had ordained as nuns, but not all. We had also seen some older nuns; the girls told us there are about 60 of them who also live here. Clearly, it wasn't just children whose lives had been turned upside down by the storm.

We walked past a huge open-air kitchen to an old-fashioned teak building—the remaining part of the original monastery.



*A few of the many students attending class in the old monastery building*

Inside there were classes in session, and we found out that in addition to the 600 resident kids, 1400 neighborhood children come here to study. So every available bit of space is used.

The abbot of the monastery, U Jayananda, had had no ‘mission’ to do so much work on behalf of orphans—it was simply a matter of being in the place and time where this kind of work was suddenly and urgently needed. So he rose to the challenge, took the kids

in who came needing help, and changed the direction of the monastery’s work. Now in addition to the school and the multi-story hostels for boys and girls, there is a large free clinic on the grounds. In the midst of the busy city fringe, it is an oasis, with a large lotus pond and many young trees.

While many local donors have made this possible (for example, the big dormitory had been offered by a family-run candle company), there are still staggering daily operating expenses that must be paid from whatever donations come in. Each day they spend 20,000,000 kyat (about 220 USD) just on food for all the kids; of course other operating expenses amount to much more. So we were very glad to offer a donation from Metta In Action to support the work of this place.

### **Happy Haven Humanitarian Project**

On the opposite side of town, but also now on the ‘urban fringe’ we found our friends at the Happy Haven Humanitarian Project AIDS orphanage to be doing very well. As usual, Daw Rosie was calmly presiding in the office, as children and helpers came in and out, and the sounds of laughter drifted in from outside. Each year we visit to offer your donation, and each year we find the place larger and better organized—and bigger.

When we first visited in 2008 there were about 20 kids living here; now there are 117 residents ranging in age from 1½ up to 17 years old. The kids who came when HHHP began are beginning to grow up, so we asked Daw Rosie where they go—and were touched to find that many stay on as helpers, caring for the expanding population of little kids. HHHP hums with energy and life: The kids get the medicine they need to stay well, the education they need to learn a skill, and the care they need to thrive.

Now, happily, HHHP is getting more local support than it once did. Local people often offer a cash donation to cover the cost of a day’s meals (in the same way as on can offer to monasteries), and we were glad to see that the roster of donors for the month was full. And



*This child will have health and love thanks to HHHP*





*The bright and airy day room in the boy's residence*

as we were visiting, a car pulled up—it was a family who had come to offer bags of rice and snacks for the kids. And the kids have no shortage of toys and teddys!

They have been also been offered more land; construction of a new 3-storey hostel was to begin this summer. This is incredibly fortunate because the need continues to grow, and HHHP is growing with it. We couldn't help notice how many more infants and toddlers there were this year than before—and were very glad to be able to keep supporting this remarkable and growing haven of safety.

### **Meanwhile, Closer to Home**

AIDS touches all corners of the country and the scale of the epidemic is only now beginning to come out of the shadows of stigma and denial. Eamonn Murphy, UNAIDS Myanmar Country Director, says, "There are nearly 200 000 people living with HIV in [Burma], with around 7000 new HIV infections annually<sup>1</sup>."

The epidemic touches everyone, and the scale of this was driven home to us one day when Daw Janesi (the head of the kitchen at CMMC) came, urgently wanting to talk in strictest privacy. It turned out that her daughter, Daw Aye Khin, and her 6 year-old grandson, Ko Sin Thu had both been diagnosed with AIDS, after the death of Daw Aye Khin's husband from the disease last April.

Although there is somewhat less stigma about AIDS in Burma, it is still present, and there is a lot of fear and shame about the disease. So Daw Janesi could scarcely bring her voice above a whisper when she was telling us about her daughter and her hands shaking when she showed me the family's patient books from the AIDS clinic. Years ago, right after cyclone Nargis, we had helped Daw Aye Khin to replace her house and shop—at the time she had been pregnant with Ko Sin Thu...and now they both had contracted AIDS! And I well remembered Daw Janesi's deep compassion when we brought her along last March when we offered our donation to HHHP—unaware that soon it would be innocent women and children in *her* family who would be directly touched.



*Waiting for treatment: Women and children at the CMMC Aye Metta Ayu Dana Clinic*

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2014/may/20140515ptg/>

The family has access to medication (thought an MSF-supported clinic—the same as HHHP), but badly needed a little support to pay the rent, as Daw Aye Khin had had a series of illnesses and was unable to do much work. We were deeply touched by what had happened and happy that we could offer the family some relief—as well as some words of reassurance about a positive outcome of treatment with the right medication.



*Bring on the rains!*

During the rainy season, last year, a tree had fallen on the back of her house, so we helped with the repairs so the family would have a dry place to live once the rainy season began.

### **Support for Families**

We are also glad to be able to offer help to several other local families each year. One day in December we went to visit Daw Wato, who cooks for the foreigners at CMMC. She single-handedly and very cheerfully makes sure we all stay healthy—and goes out of her way to help in any way she can; and because her husband is disabled her work is an important big source of income in the household of four. This year, in order to help make ends meet, Daw Wato has



*Daw Wato hard at work*

opened a little food stand in front of her house. Around the corner, the old couple we have supported for the last several years (U Pi Nan and Daw Nan Aye Kyi) had been waiting for us to pay them a visit. Unfortunately, before we could get there Daw Nan Aye Kyi had been taken to hospital and had suddenly died. Everyone was surprised at



*U Pi Nan*

this as it had always U Pi Nan's health that had been generally the worse of the two. We felt and shared the sadness of expressed by all the neighbors, and could only imagine the grief that U Pi Nan must have been feeling after being together with Daw Nan Aye Kyi for over 50 years. When we went to offer our condolences, he was presiding with a quiet gentle dignity over the traditional 'open house' that happens after a death in any Burmese family—offering what little hospitality he could afford. In spite of the cataracts that render him practically blind, he navigated deftly around the spotless little house, receiving the good wishes of neighbors and friends. The good news was that the couple's son had finally returned, and he intended to stay and help his father—and clearly people from the neighborhood love the old couple very much, so

he would not be too alone without Daw Nan Aye Kyi. But as he is unable to work or make any money, we once again paid the rent so that he would have the security of knowing that he would not be kicked off the land that his little house sits on for being unable to pay the rent. Some weeks later when we went to make our usual offering of rice, oil, and food, U Pi Nan's customary smile had returned and, with the help of his son things have returned to semblance of normalcy; The immense loss remains, but life continues.



*Inside his tidy home*





*Once this was a neighborhood, now it's "Private Property!"*

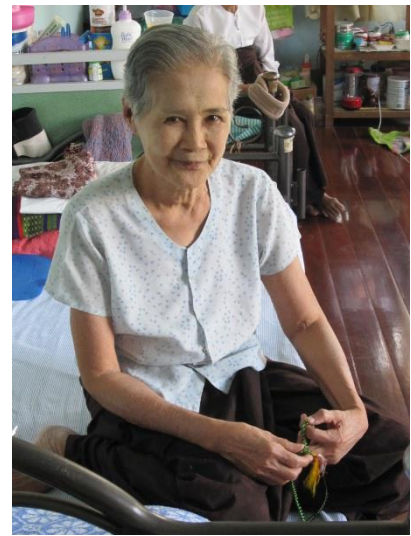
For the time being their homes are secure, but our visits to Daw Wato's and the old couple's little dwellings brought the tenuousness of life in the village bring into sharp focus. They were the only people left of what had once been a thriving little community. And recently the land across the street from their little bamboo houses had changed hands too; all the people who had been there were gone, and the perimeter trees and clumps of bamboo were being replaced with a new brick wall. This has become a commonplace event in

the area, and when property sells, more often than not all the people who have been renting a little four by five meter plot of land for their homes have to uproot their entire lives with very little notice. This is life in Burma for the 'little people,' the ones with no money and no clout, who are at the mercy the whirlwind of change that has overtaken the country.

### **Elderly and Alone—But Now Secure**

Not all elders are as fortunate as U Pi Nan. In Burma old people have generally been buffered from vulnerability by tight family ties and a strong cultural imperative to respect and care for elders. However, (as we shared with you last year, "Bridging the Gaps," June 2013), times are now so hard for some families that they can no longer offer their older loved ones even the most basic care. And occasionally, because of misfortune (such as Cyclone Nargis) or poor health, there is no family left to care for a long-lived parents and grandparents.

Fortunately, there are growing safety nets for the unfortunate elders who are 'orphaned' or unsupported by their families. One such refuge is Sisar Yeik, a home on the outskirts of Yangon for impoverished or abandoned elderly. Here 63 old folks have found care, protection, and refuge. Their stories are universally sad. The aide who was showing us around told us that



*Daw Kyi Kyi—happy for the blessings of a safety net*



*The residence is an airy and spotless refuge*

occasionally the residents do miss home—but we were greeted by old women and men who clearly were grateful to have found this place: many of them had been abandoned or picked up off the streets. Only 14 of the residents can easily move around by themselves, so much of the day they hang out and chat with each other, or read, or meditate. Aides sit with the elders, helping with the ironing or other little tasks, and in the background air conditioners hum, keeping the stifling early summer heat away. The lives of these folks are

mostly quiet, but not entirely: photos posted in the office showed visits by many people—donors, school kids, monks—and if needed, there is a van for transportation into the city.

In both the Men's and Women's hostel, elders were fingering their malas or reading Dhamma books, and there was a large well-tended shrine in both the men's and women's buildings—so we asked if everyone here was Buddhist. Most, we were told, but not all—and it was clear that need was the primary criterion for living here, nothing else.

As we toured the spotless buildings and met some of the elders, we met a gentleman named U Ni, who sat on his bed, even less able to walk than the others. It turned out that he was an amputee, having lost his lower left leg. It was incredibly touching to see U Ni's response to Ariya (and hers to him) when he realized that not only could this tall foreigner speak Burmese, but that they shared the experience of this challenging loss. We all enjoyed a cross-cultural joke, too, because U Ni had mistaken Ariya to be our friend Mimmi's son (they are close to the same age)! After it was clear who was who, Ariya showed him her prosthesis and spoke with him for a while, affirming his dignity and status as a respected elder.



*U Ni*

### **Striving to Bridge a Wide Generation Gap**



*Daw Mya Hlaing and Carol, Dec. 2013*

Elders and middle-aged people are clearly dealing with new stressors that they never had to face before. But you might ask, how is it for young people who are just coming into adulthood in this tumultuous time of change? How do they navigate the what is often a clash of cultures between the old ways and the new emerging modernism?

Not always easily, as it turns out. We were in for a steep learning curve about this when we received visits from both Ma Khin Than Nwe and her mother Daw Mya Hlaing in December 2013. Since 2011, we have supported Ma Khin Than Nwe's education since she almost lost her chance of going to university several years ago when her father died suddenly and she had had to drop out of her last year of high school in order to support the family by working in a garment factory. This year she completed her second year at university.

At first Daw Mya Hlaing was all for this, but as time has passed, she has become angry, feeling that her daughter has become disrespectful and proud. She does not understand why Ma Khin Than Nwe is not satisfied with doing a distance education degree (which is essentially useless) in order to allow her time to take a 'well-paying' job as a seamstress—after



*Ma Khin Than Nwe*





*Ma Khin Than Nwe (L) at her teacher's home*

all, this kind of work is what most girls in the village are happy to do to help their families. Ma Khin Than Nwe, meanwhile, loves attending university, and knows that she will be able to eventually use her degree help the family much more than she would be able to do otherwise. Unable to convince her mother of this, she had to move out of the family home, and lives nearby at the home of a supportive high school teacher. Instead of paying rent, she earns her way by teaching children who come to the house for tuition in the evening—this on

top of a rigorous course load and a long commute to and from the University. She has taken the initiative to do extra trainings during the summer to increase her computer skills and English language skills and sincerely intends to help the family financially once she has finished her studies and has a job. But for the time being, an unbridgeable rift has opened between mother and daughter.

At no time in the last 50 years have Burmese people been encouraged to think for themselves, and so Daw Mya Hlaing (who is uneducated and not old enough to remember the experience of an open society) could be forgiven for not understanding the value of her daughter's choice. She could not possibly have our perspective—that a 'good' job in a garment factory is essentially a form of servitude that her daughter will be able to avoid by continuing her studies. Ma Khin Than Nwe, meanwhile, looks ahead at a different horizon than her mother does, and wants more than anything to work to fulfill new dreams and bigger aspirations.

We listened with mettā and compassion to both women, and offered support to them both. We hope, as they do, that the rift will eventually heal—that Daw Mya Hlaing will come to understand the courageous and forward-thinking attitude of her bright and dedicated child, and that Ma Khin Than Nwe will have the opportunity to eventually offer support that her mother and younger siblings need so that the entire family can thrive.



*Ko Htoo Ko Ko*

Another student from the local village whom we have been supporting, Ko Htoo Ko Ko, is having an easier time completing his chemistry degree. He paid us a visit in December to thank us, and to let us know that he would not need our help this year because he was able to get lucrative construction work to pay for his ongoing education and to help his family. Like Ma Khin Than Nwe, he loves his studies and is thrilled to have the opportunity that almost missed, had it not been for our help.

### Complications, Care, and Compassion

The tension between Ma Khin Than Nwe and her mother showed us just how complicated and challenging Burma's transition is for common Burmese—the country is undergoing huge change in not only in its political and economic systems, but also in its society and culture. It is a complicated and difficult time—one person told me, “We have never had to do this before.” For everyone, it is a steep learning curve.

But in spite of witnessing immense suffering, we also have reason to hope. Because we are continually inspired and uplifted by the kind hearts and hard work of the many many ‘average’ people in Burma whose stories will never make the international news, but who work tirelessly for the betterment and well-being of their neighbors and fellow citizens. The people who benefit from your donations cannot thank you directly, but we can tell you their stories and show you their grateful smiles. Each one says thank you, and each is gifted with more ease and well-being.

With Much mettā and gratitude to you all,

Ven. Virañani

