

A Visit to Thaleba

(Support for Villagers)



My dear *Metta In Action* friend: I invite you to join me for a visit in Thaleba. Thaleba is the native village of Sayadaw U Indaka, the village where Metta In Action has been supporting a number of projects since 2009. The support given by MIA includes: solar panels, school uniforms, a water tower, an Education Fund, the Metta Clinic, or support for elders.

We start the journey in Pyin Oo Lwin where we leave at 4 am from the new branch of Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre. Venerable Virañani and myself are accompanied by some meditators who did the special two-week metta retreat at the new meditation centre: Alex, Manfred, Beni, and Alexander. And, of course, our dear friend Mimmi is with us, too. First we head down the winding road to Mandalay. From Mandalay the road heads to the north-west until we reach a town called Sadaung. After Sadaung we have to leave the main road and take a dirt road that leads westwards through fields of wheat, sunflowers, and peanuts. The fields are often lined by palm trees and occasional clusters of trees.



On the bridge



.... across the Mu River

Before reaching the Mu River we pass through a couple of villages. With the Mu River in sight, we know that we have finally arrived – after three and a half hours of driving. The bridge over the river is a wooden construction which is dismantled during the rainy season when the river turns into a big torrent with a much higher water level.

We slowly cross the bridge in the little mini-bus being very happy that we are here. For me it is a truly special occasion because I have not been to Thaleba in the past two years due to my health condition.

As we drive into the village it seems that not much has changed. The dirt road is as dusty as always, leaving a big milky dust-cloud behind us. As a result of these dusty roads throughout the village, all the shrubs and trees next to the roads are covered with a grey coat.



The curious and shy kids

We drive to the school and in the big school yard we get out of the mini-bus. Immediately, we are surrounded by a big cluster of students who are very curious to see these foreigners. The village is so far off the beaten track that under normal circumstances foreigners do not come and visit the village. Our visit is a rare ‘once-a-year’ event and, in a way, an entertainment that these kids do not want to miss.

They are curious to see us but at the same time they are shy to say something. To break the ice I ask a little girl,

“Namay belou ko ba da lay? – What is your name?” The little girl looks at me, embarrassed. Her friend quickly whispers into her ear, “Ni Lar.” And shyly she answers, “Ni Lar.” Her friend seems to be an intelligent and sharp-witted student, so I turn to her and ask her some questions. Without hesitating, she answers my questions, confident and proud. Her name is Tan Tan Swe and she is in 4th standard. She loves English and, obviously, she is very good at it.



Tan Tan Swe

Soon we are called into the library situated at the entrance of the school. On the roof of the library there are four solar panels which Metta In Action had offered to the village in 2011. The solar panels generate electricity for the two main streets, the pagoda, and the school. Inside the library, Sayadaw is already discussing various topics with the village elders. He tells us that we should move over to the village clinic for the official ceremony. We leave the library and walk about two hundred meters on the dusty street. With Sayadaw and Venerable Virañani walking in our group, it is not unusual to see that people pay their respects to the monastics on the side of the street – sitting on the dusty ground and doing three prostrations.





Metta Clinic Ceremony

In front of the Thaleba ‘Metta Clinic’, we see a make-shift tent and many elderly men and women are already sitting there, waiting. People in (rural) Burma, as well as in many other Asian countries, can wait. Their concept of time and being on time is somehow different to our Western relationship with time, and obviously very different to my Swiss-conditioned approach to time. I had painfully noticed this difference so many times, not only in Burma but also in other Asian countries!

People live in harmony with the natural rhythm of day and night. Each activity is done at its appropriate time, and when one thing is done, it is time to do the next thing – no hurry, no stress.

These elders may have been told that the ceremony starts at 9 am. But 9 am is only an indicator that the ceremony starts around ‘mid-morning’ – not very early morning and not midday. The ceremony starts when everybody is there – in this way, we are perfectly on (Burmese) time!

As usual, a person announces the programme of the ceremony which traditionally starts with the recitation of the homage to the Buddha, the three refuges, and the five precepts. After the opening recitation, the village Sayadaw gives a speech. Then it is my turn to say something. I express my joy and happiness to be back in Thaleba, back to my Thaleba-family.



The village Sayadaw is dedicating the merits

Over the years the close connection with many people in Thaleba has grown deeper and the invisible bonds have become stronger. I continue to say that I care for the happiness and well-being of all present (the elders) in particular and of all Thalebans in general. To mentally wish people to be happy and well is one thing (as one does in formal metta meditation), but to actually DO something for their happiness and well-being is another thing. This, so I explain to these elders, is exactly what we try to enact with the ‘Metta In Action’ projects. We want to manifest our good will in actions that support and help people in need. I finish my short speech with a Burmese metta chant by Chanmyay Sayadaw, “Metta in Deed, Speech, and Thought.”



This is followed by a speech given by Venerable Virañani and one by Sayadaw U Indaka. A man then reads the accounting of the clinic funds and the number of patients treated during the past year.

Towards the end of this ceremony we offer the Metta In Action donations: this year we offer to the ‘Elders Fund’, the ‘Education Fund’, the ‘Metta Clinic Fund’, and towards a new water purifying system in the school.

The 'Elders Fund' is now able to support elders, who do not have the usual and all-important family support, from Thaleba and eight neighbouring villages. This is a welcome step to include more elderly people into this invaluable safety net. Unlike in many Western countries, old-folk-homes are almost non-existing in Burma, with some exceptions in bigger towns or cities. And unlike many Western countries, there is no social security network set up by the government. If a person is left without daughters and sons or without relatives, then life can become incredibly difficult with advanced age. There is no financial support, nobody to care, nobody to do the shopping, cooking, washing, etc.

We are told that one elderly lady who was supported by the 'Elders Fund' just passed away the previous week. She had no children or relatives who could have taken care of her. The villagers had arranged for her to live in the local monastery where she got the necessary care, support, and a 'home'.

The 'Education Fund' is now supporting 85 students from Thaleba, from kindergarten up to 10th standard. These are students from families who otherwise could not afford to send their children to school. All the expenses for books, note books, pencils, pens, or the school uniform are covered by the fund.

We meet these kids just before they leave school in the afternoon. After pointing out who is in which standard the headmaster says that in general they are quite disciplined. He adds that especially the boys are a bit 'playful' – which I interpret as being a bit naughty at times.

How could it be different?!



U Aye Ko Myint
Headmaster



The water purifying
system ...

The new water purifying system in the school was on the priority list of the headmaster, U Aye Ko Myint. He wants to ensure that all the kids can drink clean and safe water. In the previous year, the government had offered a water purifying system to the school. However, the unit they offered was too small for a population of nearly 700 students.



... which is too
small

Later in the day, U Aye Ko Myint shows us the water purifying system. He pushes the button and the water starts trickling out very slowly. It takes a long time to just fill one cup! Very obviously, this small water purifying system is quite useless for using at the school.

After the ceremony it is already time to have lunch because Sayadaw and Venerable Virañani need to eat before noon. This year they have prepared a room opposite the Metta Clinic in the basement of a family home. Sayadaw and the two village monks sit around one low table and we foreigners sit around two other low tables. The family and many volunteers make sure that we have everything we need. On the table there is a feast with a great array of different dishes: local beans, fried bean 'donuts', green vegetables, tomato salad, pickled tea leaves (lapet – the 'Burmese national snack' that also goes with meals), and soup.

As we eat again and again we are urged to take more of this or that curry – a typical Burmese scene.

In Burma, the hosts never eat with the guests. For me it took a long time to get accustomed to this habit. I always felt embarrassed to have people watching me eating. I wondered, “Why can’t we eat together?!” And often I felt quite a bit annoyed when the hosts scooped more curries into my plate when I felt already full. However, I felt obliged to empty my plate because I thought that it would be rude to leave food on the plate.

The many women stand around us and make sure that the bowls with the curries are always full. “Do you want more rice? Do you want more beans? Do you want more green vegies?”

Finally, after having assured them that we are *really* full, they remove the curries and put many plates with desserts on the table: water melon (fresh from the fields outside the village), apples, bananas, boiled peanuts, cookies, and steamed rice cakes.



Thaleba lunch dishes



Sayadaw talking to village women

In the meantime, villagers are streaming into the room to pay respect to Sayadaw at the other table. Many of them bring local produce they want to offer. Soon many bottles of local wild honey and bags full of peanuts are piling up next to Sayadaw.

We watch the scene for a little while, sipping green tea and talking.



Manfred, Mimmi, and Beni engaged in a discussion



Two village ladies offering honey to Sayadaw

Then we head out into the village for a stroll. First we go to the pagoda situated next to the school and close to the river.

I am curious to see how much the trees have grown on the pagoda compound. In 2011, Metta In Action made a donation for trees to be planted, providing shade – especially in the hot season – around the pagoda. Besides providing shade for humans, trees are welcome homes and abodes for birds, insects, and other living beings.



..... soon providing more shade and shelter



The trees are growing

Within these four years, the trees have grown quite a bit, now they are two to three meters in height. We also notice that some of the old and crumbling stupas have been renovated.

From the pagoda we walk over to the river where women are taking a bath and doing their laundry in the water. Bathing is a public affair, done elegantly with the longyi pulled up and tied under the armpits. In this way, the private parts are covered during the whole process of cleaning the body. On a few occasions, I had been taking a shower ‘Burmese style’ but I was always a bit anxious that my longyi would slip down! This year the bank is quite steep and so we watch them and the picturesque view of the river from above. During the rainy season the river rises much higher and, as a result, the Western bank of the river changes its shape every year.



Every day people bathe and wash clothes in the Mu River



The picturesque landscape along the Mu River

Already in the morning, many people had invited us for a visit to their house. It is difficult to say 'no' because we do not want to be impolite or even rude.



At the home of U Kyaung Nee and his daughter

A visit to a family home follows more or less the same 'ritual.' We are invited to sit down in the 'living space' of the house, be it a traditional thatched bamboo house or be it a more recently built brick building. On the table more "Thaleba-treats" are waiting: water melon, boiled peanuts, fried fish from the Mu River, rice cakes, or sesamin brittle. Green tea and the omnipresent coffee-mix packages (Three-in-one) are also nicely put on a tray. And everywhere we are urged to eat, "Eat! Eat more! Try this! Try that!" And this after a big lunch!!!

During my years of being a nun it was easy to get away with eating none of these treats because everybody in Burma understands that nuns and monks do not eat after noon.

However, this time I have to find the balance of eating a tiny little bit of this or that by nibbling a peanut or two and of politely saying, "No, thank you."

As we leave the house of the old grandfather, U Kyaung Nee, we see a group of teenagers hanging out at the porch of the neighbouring house. It turns out that they are 9th and 10th standard students studying for their exams in March. Two of the local teachers, a couple, prepare them for these important exams because only those who pass the 10th standard exam are allowed to go to university. But the percentage of those failing in this exam is very high.

We meet two 10th standard students (standing): Shine Wunno Oo and Hluang Ko, and four 9th standard students (sitting): Aung Myat San, the twins Nin Thet Lin and Nin Thet Win, and Tun Lin Aung.



The students with their teachers

Now we amble back to the school as it is time to leave Thaleba and drive back to Pyin Oo Lwin. On the way, we stop at the village across the Mu River, the Kyaugone village, to offer



The clinic at Kyaugone village, Sayadaw U Khema



our last donation. The new village Sayadaw, a former resident of Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre in Yangon, had asked for some support for the new village clinic. We were surprised of this request because we assumed that all the people of Kyaugone village had easy access to the Metta Clinic across the river in Thalaba. What we forgot to consider was the fact that the bridge is dismantled during the rainy season and that for four months of the year the

closest medical clinic is far away for the people in Kyaugone village. Considering these circum-

stances we made a small donation towards this essential infrastructure in the village. Sayadaw U Khema, who had been very helpful for many of our Metta In Action projects in Yangon in the past few year (like building and repairing houses), gratefully received our donation so that the doors and windows of the building can be finished.

It has been a very full day: so many impressions, so many encounters with familiar faces, so much joy, and so much contentment. But my heart is also deeply touched by the difficulties, the problems, the pain, or the hardships that some of these people have to face. The compassionate heart wants to relieve all the suffering and hardships not only of these people but of all living beings....

Thanks to your ongoing and generous support we are able to improve or remove the difficult or painful conditions of many people in Thaleba and its surrounding villages. Each little piece of suffering or worry that has been removed is a great and invaluable relief for the person affected by it. Often people tell us that they are so grateful for our help (which actually means: the help made possible through Metta In Action – the help made possible through YOU!) that they send metta to us every single day. In this way, YOU are also one of the recipients of the heartfelt metta wishes radiated on a daily basis by many people in Thaleba and the surrounding villages.



May you be healthy and well, happy and full of joy.
May all beings be healthy and well, happy and full of joy.
May you be free from danger and harm.
May all beings be free from danger and harm.
May you live at ease and in peace.
May all beings live at ease and in peace.

With metta
Ariya Baumann

