

Metta In Action Update (3)
September, 2015

Tending the Community Garden

(Support for Villagers and Children in Yangon and Mandalay)



Each year in addition to the large projects that we regularly support (such as offerings to nuns, to schools, and for the health care and education funds in Sayadaw U Indaka's village), we make sure we leave some space in the budget for catch-all category we call 'community support.' These are donations for health care, education, and community development—some of which are planned ahead of time as 'regular' yearly donations, while others are one-time offerings.

We love making these offerings, because of the mysterious way that their benefits ripple out into the world. The amounts we give are often relatively small, but the good that can result years later is potentially immense. Small seeds grow into huge trees—so we keep planting seeds!

The one-time donations may be a heartfelt response to specific requests, or simply because one of us has learned about someone who needs special assistance. People at the Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Centre (CMMC) are very aware of our work and are happy to help, so not infrequently Sayadaw U Indaka or one of the other monks or nuns will tell us where there is need. The monks are particularly attuned to the needs of the villagers because they walk for alms every morning and so know the people and their problems very well. Often they have been our eyes and ears: for example, when we re-built homes after Cyclone Nargis and in 2011, it was two of the monks who coordinated both locating people in need and the construction of their new homes.

In addition to hearing from the monks and nuns about others, we are often approached directly for support of one kind or another from villagers who have heard about our work through the ‘village grapevine.’ So it is a big part of our preparations for the yearly offerings to sift through all the requests that come in and decide who to support, depending on need and what we have to offer.



Little Pan Phyu and her parents at CMMC before going to the hospital for her pre-op assessment.

Ma Pan Phyu

In December we received a very touching request from Ma Thwet, who works in the office at CMMC, and has a small shop right outside the monastery gate. Every day, a young mother was coming to the shop with her disabled daughter and Ma Thwet asked if we could do anything to help the little girl get treatment. Ma Pan Phyu was born with malformed legs; even though she was in all other respects a normal toddler, she could only move by dragging herself around with her arms. She had been examined by doctors when she was born and they had recommended surgery, but her parents moved to Mingaladon soon afterward and was too poor and uninformed to follow up.

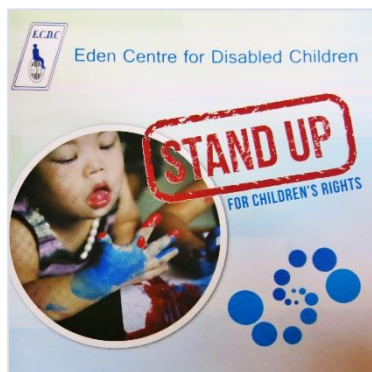
The timing of Ma Thwet’s request was fortuitous: Marjo had just arrived, bringing a flier she had encountered in her travels about a French NGO (AMFA; Association Médicale Franco Asiatique, <www.amfa-france.org>) that regularly brings Orthopaedic surgeons from France and Switzerland to work in Yangon. This wonderful NGO also supports poor patients, so that the kids can have the procedures they need even if the family cannot pay. In all respects, this was a perfect match!

So I sent an email to the founder, Prof. Dr. Patel in Paris, and he was most helpful—so in early March we took Ma Pan Phyu and her parents to the Yangon Children’s Hospital for her first pre-operative tests and assessments. It will be a long process with many operations, but the doctors are hopeful of a good outcome. There will be little cost to the family because the operations are sponsored by the French-Burmese NGO and the government, but Metta In Action offered a donation for transportation and food for the family members who stay with the little girl when she is in hospital.

Not long after taking the family for this appointment, we discovered the Eden Centre for Disabled Children, thanks to another Metta In Action donor who wanted to offer to a school for kids with special needs. So we were able to give the information about this wonderful Centre to Ma Pan Phyu’s parents. The ECDC was founded in 2000 and is the first such organization in Burma for kids with physical and



The Doctors and staff of the Yangon Children’s Hospital orthopaedic ward who will be caring for Ma Pan Phyu



An excerpt from the ECDC's flier, as well done as the high standard of curricula they offer disabled kids.

mental challenges—there is still quite a bit of stigma attached to deformity and disability in Burma and so it has only been recently that such programs exist. The ECDC is a large centre with many offerings; fortunately, there are generous scholarships so that all kids who need it can receive training, therapy, and vocational education. So we were very happy to be the nexus between Ma Pan Phyu's family and these organizations—she would never have otherwise had the means or information to access them.

Kaung Kaung

Another request we were happy to support was one on behalf of Kaung Kaung, one of the liveliest visitors to CMMC—and the nephew of the monk who is the vice-abbot of the monastery. In spite of losing his dad to liver cancer 3 years ago when he was just 4 years old, Kaung Kaung is a bright spark: happy, intelligent, engaging, and full of energy. He's now started his first year at the local government school and told us that he really likes his classes (*except* geography, which he finds a bit difficult)—and his English vocabulary is impressive. Like solo mums everywhere, his mother (Daw Pa Pa) never stops thinking of Kaung Kaung's well-being—and does the work of two people in raising him. Now that Kaung Kaung is in school, the situation for her has become even more challenging than it already was: if he is to succeed at his schoolwork, he must attend tuition each evening at a local teacher's home, and Pa Pa has to find a way to finance *that* on top of the rest of his school expenses. Unfortunately, they live across a busy highway and too far away to attend the free tuition school near CMMC, so she must find the equivalent of 15 USD each month to pay for the tuition.



In Burma, even the best and the brightest kids need extra tuition to succeed at their studies.

SO even though her situation is less dire than it might be in a place where family bonds are weaker than in Burma (she has strong family support from her own mother), Pa Pa needed some extra help. She is naturally positive and resilient, but when we told her we could offer some support for Kaung Kaung's tuition, her smile was even wider than usual—with gladness, gratitude, and obvious relief. As for Kaung Kaung, he just seemed glad to slip away from the boring adult conversation to find more interesting things to explore—innocent for the time being about what it is to have financial worries.

Bogalay Sayadaw

Another one-time request we responded to positively was actually a 'top-up' of a previous donation from long ago, made after Cyclone Nargis in 2008. At that time, some supporters of CMMC told us of an elderly monk in Bogalay who urgently needed a safe and dry place to live after the cyclone wiped out the building where he had been living. So we had offered a donation

to help build him a sturdy wood kuti. Now, seven years on, the termites, ants, and tropical moisture had taken their toll and the structure badly needed to be repaired. We happily offered this *dāna* so that this Sayadaw can continue to serve his community happily and in good health.

Ongoing Family Support: U Pi Nan, Daw Wato, Daw Mya Hlaing and Ma Khin Thant Nwe



Occasionally, ‘one-time’ donations become a yearly event, if there is ongoing need and we are impressed by the quality of the recipient—these two aspects, together with a sense of personal connection, are important factors in deciding whether we are willing to offer ongoing support.

In the village next to CMMC, as in the last several years, we made four donations to individuals or families to whom we have an ongoing connection. Hearing their stories and visiting their homes is an amazing window into a world we cannot imagine, coming from our privileged lives in the West.

U Pi Nan

The first of these recipients is an elderly gentleman, U Pi Nan. Every year since 2011 we have made a relatively modest offering to pay for the year’s rent for his little plot of land. His situation is highly unusual: even in modern Burma it is rare that elders have to fend for themselves—but he had had to, relying mostly on the support of concerned neighbors who were themselves not well-off. So again this year we were happy to lift the burden of concern about possible eviction from his frail shoulders by paying the rent. And as usual, we also brought a few staples: rice, oil, onions, washing soap, and candles.

Last year, after the death of his U Pi Nan’s wife, their errant son finally made an appearance and has since settled with his father and works to support them both, so the situation is a bit better than it was in previous years. But it turns out that the expensive heart medication U Pi Nan must now take is more costly than their monthly rent, so our support is still greatly needed.

When we visited, we found him out in the garden, resting—although he energetically jumped up to show us around the tiny compound. As usual the house was as neat as can be and the garden beautifully tended, with vegetables and flowers in abundance—all U Pi Nan’s work. He told us that he gets quite exhausted ‘just’ getting water from the well for the garden or house—hardly a surprise, as it must be brought up by hand, bucket by bucket. We think nothing of turning on the hose to water the garden, but for U Pi Nan this would be an unimaginable luxury. We are always struck by U Pi Nan’s dignity and remarkably cheerful attitude in the face of all his challenges. And we were very happy to hear how things are now a bit easier for him. His son works as a security guard at a nearby factory, alternating weeks



U Pi Nan's tiny but spotless house



U Pi Nan's seat in his back yard is shaded by trees and an edible gourd vine, offering welcome respite from the heat.

of day and night shifts. For this he gets a monthly salary of the equivalent of 70 USD per month, which buys food for them both, and the medicines that U Pi Nan needs.

So now that there is some money for health care, U Pi Nan recently had an operation on his cataracts and he can see again (he had been essentially blind)! He also has a heart check-up every other month (or more often as needed); the special medicines he requires are very expensive by Burmese standards, using up half of the son's earnings; most of the families in the village would never be able to afford them—or the consultation with a

specialist that is necessary to get them (the Metta Clinic at CMMC provides general care, but to see a cardiologist requires a visit to a hospital or clinic that costs much more than most villagers can afford).

Daw Wato

Daw Wato works tirelessly at CMMC to make sure we foreigners are healthy and well-fed, arriving at the monastery at 3:30 each morning to cook, and often working extra hours in the afternoon helping to clean rooms for arriving yogis. Sayadaw U Indaka brought her up to the forest centre near Pyin Oo Lwin in January to run the kitchen for the *mettā* retreat for western yogis—he knows very well that because of her high standard of hygiene we foreigners do not get ill when she is in charge. This was a special trip for her, the first time in her life that she had ever been to Upper Myanmar!

Although she sometimes gets *dāna* from yogis, Daw Wato's work at CMMC is entirely unpaid. She makes most of the family's income with her daughter-in-law at a little fried food stand that they open each morning and evening. Her husband hurt his leg in a construction accident and so can do only a little work, but he contributes what he can. And the daughter-in-law also works at a factory down the road. This gives the family of four (their son died suddenly 3 years ago) enough to get by, but not much more. So we make a point to make a small offering each year to help maintain the family's tiny house. Many villagers, Daw Wato's family included, live in little structures made almost entirely of bamboo. Thanks to termites and rot, they must repeatedly be rebuilt, an activity that generally takes place in the dry season so that family will be best protected when the torrential rains come in May and June.



Daw Wato giving her special kind of support to the mettā retreat yogis in Pyin Oo Lwin.



And at home in Mingaladon, showing us the wall that needed to be fixed.

So this year at Daw Wato's place it was the South wall that needed to be fixed, and we went to visit and make the offering one late afternoon in January. As usual in the evening, we found the family sitting outside on the wide front porch. When they welcomed the six of us into the house, there was not enough room for everyone to sit down so we made the offering standing up. But in spite of the lack of space, that little house could hold a lot of happiness and gratitude that evening!

Once again, we were touched by the building's small size and simplicity—homes like Daw Wato's are sometimes not much bigger than the average Western European kitchen. There is no furniture to speak of other than the occasional bamboo chair or small stool, and at night families unroll bamboo sleeping mats and sleep together on the floor under a mosquito net. Daw Wato told us that they often sleep out on the porch when it is hot—even though it is outside and right next to the road, it is much cooler!

An amusing episode followed the offering, as Daw Wato and her husband did their best to take photos of us sitting on their porch. Obviously, a camera was something neither of them had used very much, and taking the photo was a bit of a challenge. So there were many images of disembodied feet or heads before Greg showed them how to frame the photo, and finally there was success. Another example of technology that many Burmese people have no access to that we take completely for granted.



Ma Khin Thant Nwe: Challenges and Determination

As far as technology is concerned, Ma Khin Thant Nwe is another story—she is young, educated, and much more tech-savvy than her elders. But she too faces difficulties we cannot imagine: her situation is best described as 'complex.'

We have been supporting her education since 2011, when she returned to secondary school after a year's hiatus after having to drop out and go to work in a nearby factory. She and the family were then very happy that she could return to school and then go to university, but the support has since had some unintended results. We do our best to take into account the long term consequences of our offerings, but of course it's impossible to predict what these will be. At the beginning we had made a commitment to support her through her university study, and knew we would stand by her until this is complete—even if the way did not turn out to be easy.



Huh?...And the final successful result (more or less)! (Bottom photo R to L: Greg, Mimmi, Ariya, Carol, Narayan, Virañani)



Ma Khin Thant Nwe

And it hasn't been. Last year, we described the problems Ma Khin Thant Nwe has faced in getting her education and the rift it has created in the family (see "A Steep Learning Curve," October 2014). This year there is still no détente between her and her mother, nor is there likely to be one any time soon. Her mother, Daw Mya Hlaing, remains adamant that Ma Khin Thant Nwe must again suspend her studies to support the family in the short term, and cannot understand the importance of decent higher education (the alternative she envisions is distance learning, which in Burma is not a lot better than nothing at all). Ma Khin Thant Nwe is doing everything she can to continue—which has meant leaving the family and living alone. The situation she faces is a common one in Burma now, with tension between parents who only know the old possibilities and kids with a newer vision. But we continue to offer support to them both, listening with

mettā and compassion to their stories and their pain. Each is doing her best, with *her* unique understanding of the world.

On top of the continuing family saga, Ma Khin Thant Nwe has had an additional challenge this year because she (and most of her classmates) had not passed the theory portion one of her 12 subjects. University regulations in Burma are different than in the West and we were surprised to learn that she is not allowed to continue *any* further study at all until she successfully repeats that one single course. Of course Ma Khin Thant Nwe is disappointed, but is resigned to taking the extra year to complete her studies. Fortunately, she is also quite resourceful, and has work after school and during breaks offering tuition to kids. What she makes has paid for her university fees, but she told us she needed help with transportation and living expenses; she cannot stay at home unless she agrees to stop her education and return to work in the garment factory to help support the family—which for her is out of the question. So she rents a small room near the market. We offered her the support she needed for this, and gave her mother a donation as well, to help with expenses so that Ma Khin Thant Nwe's younger siblings will be able to continue *their* schooling. The cost of school fees and supplies for the two kids is only 8,000 Kyat per month (about 7€)—a small amount for us, but an insurmountable obstacle for the mother who has been struggling to make ends meet since the death of her husband 4 years ago.



Daw Mya Hlaing

Aye Mya Myaing Education Fund

Since 2010, we have been working with U Sujana, a dynamic monk who administers the education fund and lending library in Thaleba, and who also offers support for several students at his own monastery near Mandalay. Like us, U Sujana knows the value and power of a good education, and is passionate about opening its doors for as many kids as possible. So when Greg, Carol, and I

were in Mandalay in late December, he was eager to come and tell us of the students who are being supported by your donations.



U Sujana's newest protégé, Ko Than Win Aung.

Last year he had introduced us to Ma Aye Mwin Kyaw, who at the time was in the last year of Medical studies at Mandalay University. Hers was the first news he shared, and it was so wonderful to hear that she had successfully finished her formal studies and is working as a 'house surgeon;' basically this is a paid position where young doctors who have passed all their theoretical examinations further polish their clinical skills under the direction of senior staff at the hospital. After they have completed the year as a house surgeon, they are fully-qualified physicians. So Ma Aye Mwin Kyaw is on her way!

This year U Sujana came with a new medical student, Ko Than Win Aung, who is at the beginning of his second year of study and just setting out on his journey to be a doctor. Metta In Action and a monk from his village have supported Ko Than Win Aung's first year at medical school, and U Sujana hopes to be able to continue the support through the entire 6-year course of study.

Ko Than Win Aung is ethnically Myanma, but comes from a remote village in the Kachin State where there are more than 500 people but no doctor. As a child he had needed to go to the hospital in the nearest city, and he found it a terrifying place: he was ill and far from home, and because he did not speak the language, he could not communicate with anyone but family. That was when he decided he wanted to become a doctor, so that other kids in his village do not ever have to have that kind of experience.

He explained—in English—that his training takes six years altogether. The first year's courses were mostly basic sciences and humanities, and now he begins to learn the more advanced subjects that are important building blocks of medical understanding, such as anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry. He enjoys the work very much and is looking forward to going home and being able to help the people in his village when he finishes.

Besides Ko Than Win Aung, the fund supports 17 other younger students who live at the monastery. All the kids come from very distant places, and a number of them from villages in so-called 'black areas'—conflict zones where no-one is safe, and it is no longer possible for kids to get an education in anything except how



Ko Than Win Aung explains his six-year course of medical study to us and to U Sujana.

to shoot a gun. But here they are safe and can live a more normal childhood life. The younger ones study nearby, but there are six students in 7th and 8th Standard who need to take a car to the high school.

HHHP

Happy Haven Humanitarian Project (HHHP) is another place we continue to support; every year since 2008 we have given a donation for the welfare and benefit of the dozens of AIDS orphans that live there. The home used houses—and the construction boom has made HHHP to be quite isolated, on the far edge of Yangon, with the occasional building separated by large areas of vacant land. Now there are not so many spaces between the even harder to find than usual, because the landmarks change dramatically every time we visit!

Compared to the surroundings, we have seen a more gradual change in HHHP itself over the years, only clearly discernable in retrospect: now there are many more kids, more infrastructure, and vastly more support than there used to be. When we first went to HHHP, the official story was that there was no AIDS problem in Burma—so the orphanage had to work ‘under the radar’ so that they did not attract the wrong kind of attention. Now that things are much more open, the amount of local support that is flooding in is touching and inspiring. And it hasn’t hurt one bit that a famous local actor Kyaw Thu and his wife Dr Myint Myint Khin have become one of their supporters; since then, HHHP has become much more visible and popular to prospective donors! So we noticed that now there is a whiteboard in the office with a long list of monthly donors—each offering cash, rice, oil, Ovaltine, and other necessities on a regular basis, month after month.



HHHP kids in 2011



Infants are especially loved at HHHP

There is a new three-story building under construction, and they expect it to be finished this year. And they certainly need the space! Now there are 117 orphans living there, from 2 to 20 years of age. The school-age kids are able to attend nearby government schools, and this year for the first time there are students in 10th Standard (the last year of secondary school). Every one of the kids is HIV-positive, but they get all the medicines they need free of charge from the government hospital in Mingaladon and from an NGO from Holland. Thirty-three staff take care of the kids and keep the place running. One big change this year was the absence of Daw Rosie, who was quite a loving presence in the office.

Sadly she had recently died of a heart attack. But even in her absence the care and love for the kids was palpable. One change that we were happy to see was that now that there are so many more visitors (and local visitors) the staff are now quite protective of the kids' privacy—with a 'no camera' policy firmly in place.



So while we cannot show you current photos of the children, we can assure you that they are well, and very rambunctiously happy! It was the usual slightly chaotic scene in the nursery, with many little ones zooming around and toys everywhere. In the boy's and girl's hostels it was quieter—it was late afternoon rest time and a number of the kids were watching a show on the TV that was in the girl's common room.

“Triage”

Of course, we wish we could offer to every worthy cause that crosses our radar screen, but funds are finite. So sometimes we have to make the hard but conscious choices to maximize the benefits of our donations, even if it means not giving to worthy projects—like triage in an emergency



An abundantly fertile village field near CMMC, providing sustenance for many, 2012...

medical situation. For Metta In Action, if needs are equal, a strong and long connection is a big factor that helps decide where we finally end up giving, as well as how many people the donations will benefit. So this year we had to make the difficult decision to forgo offering to some worthy community causes in order that your donations could be used for teacher salaries at the monastic schools we know so well.

And so in the next and final update about our 2015 donations you we will share the news of what is going on at these monastic schools. They are amazing places, doing so much to benefit poor and disadvantaged kids, at a time when homes, fields, and sometimes whole neighborhoods are changing and disappearing under a tide of real estate speculation and development. As the country changes the gap between the rich and the poor grows ever wider, and need only seems to increase. So we and the many who benefit from your generosity are immensely grateful for all you offer—these gifts offer hope, encouragement, and empowerment in immensely difficult times.



...and in 2015, walled off and choked with weeds—now only used to grow money for wealthy speculators.

With a deep bow of thanks and *mettā* from all of us!

Virañani

8 September 8, 2015