

Myanmar Trip Report 2015

Monday November 30, 2015 Day #1

Yangon

Either Steve or I will write a daily report. I apologize in advance for mine being shorter and less interesting than Steve's and blame the engineer in me. Duke would understand. There is no report from yesterday when I arrived in the morning and my mission was to stay up as long as possible. I lasted until 7pm and spent most of the afternoon at Panditarama where I met U Nanda and we patted each other. Too bad there was no interpreter as we share an eventful history.

The change in weather has been substantial, coming from Vancouver where the temperature when I left was below freezing in the morning to hot and humid Yangon with temperatures in the mid 90's in the afternoon. The welcome from Kalya and her family has been as warm as the weather. What would we do without them?

I managed to stay in bed until 5 am today, exercised, and then fed the monks outside Classique, always a wonderful way to start the day. After breakfast outside, I visited Daniel and Roann at the Sule Shangri La. They are friends we met in Africa. I could have been at a luxury hotel anywhere in the world.

There are numerous hotels as well as everything else imaginable under construction including whole city blocks. With all the new cars as well, getting around Yangon is not easy. Lots of new tourist initiatives are popping up with the increase in tourism. Daniel and Roann are on a small luxury cruise boat, 16 cabins, which just started operating between Yangon and Mandalay. They are interested in the work MBSPF is doing here and might support us in the future.

Back to Classique where I greeted Steve upon his arrival. There was a flurry of phone activity where we finalized the details of our trip for the rest of the week. One call was to U Hla Maung whom we visited in the pm. He gave us his perspective on all the changes, slow going despite high expectations, and we set up a joint visit with Daw Sanda for later in the

week. We stopped at Citi Mart on the way home to buy medicine and with Steve falling asleep in the van as I was telling him a very interesting story; we returned to Classique for a nap. We will go to Alamaden for dinner once he is up. It's hard to believe that I have been here for 2 days and not yet had a milky tea.

Tuesday December 1, 2015.

U Tejaniya, Ma Rupasinghi, Viranani, Appamada + 1 Nuns' School

I (Steve) arrived Monday morning 9:15 after a short flight from Bangkok. Predictable jet-lagged, but it didn't affect me until Roger was telling me (from his perspective) an interesting story. Ahh-h - huh!?! So, settling into Classique, greeting Ma (Daw Khin Aye Kyi) and Kalya and Naw Lay working behind the registration desk. After the phone calls Roger mentioned, we had our schedule for Tuesday morning.

Forethought plans unfolded otherwise as we headed off for an 8:15/30 appointment with U Tejaniya. We were scheduled to pick up Yaminn Nwe, a doctor we use regularly for translating, where she was staying along the route. Since it was the first time to meet her at that location, our driver Sai Oo needed to call her a few times, ask several folks along the way, circle back around where we had previously passed and eventually stop across the street from where she was staying. Luckily, there was a break in the relentless traffic and Yaminn Nwe was able to cross the 4 lanes of bumper-to-bumper traffic in a short time and we were on our way.

We eventually arrived at Shwe Oo Min Meditation Center to meet Sayadaw at 9 am. We knew it would be a shorter than expected meeting and indeed, we spent 2-3 minutes greeting, 5 minutes clarifying dates for his scheduled trip to Maui in 2016, and another 5 minutes discussing whether he and I would be able to travel up-country after my schools work between Dec 15-20th to meet with the reclusive, secluded Maha Bodhi Myaing Sayadaw. He is someone who reputedly has very good dhamma practice. (Whether he is that enlightened or not, no one can say and he wouldn't anyway, as he's a monk and they don't talk about such things.) He just avoids people as much as possible, so it is not yet clear whether he will consent to our visit, even though U Tejaniya knows now where he is staying.

After those 15 minutes in Sayadaw's meeting room, we piled into his new Red SUV for the 50-yard drive to Dhamma Vibhajja, Sayadaw's own retreat center for foreigners. He also has build a dozen or so meditation huts, one of which we (Roger, I, Kamala and Carol Wilson) funded. He showed it to us, just as the senior Vietnamese nun who translates for Sayadaw was sweeping it out. It is a very functional duplex of mirrored sides that includes an 8' X 14' single room with metal framed bed in one corner, and an enclosed bathroom in the rear with a hot water heater, Western sit-down toilet, a shower and a lavatory. The whole unit is air-conditioned and totally suitable for practice, except for the continued construction outside where a small meditation hall is being built over the next year.

We mentally itemized the list of things needed to make the units more habitable including mosquito net, mattress, chair, table, wooden cabinet or cupboard for shelf and hanger space, some cleaning buckets, broom, mop, linens, (light) blanket, pillow, a teapot, lamp, etc. We don't have time to get these things right now, but possibly we will when we return from our trip to Kalaw and Mandalay and then Carol will be in town to help select the needed items. The understanding was that any of us could have first dibs on use of the `` units with advance notice and otherwise, Sayadaw would have yogis staying in there. There might be some possibility to request that our students and/or friends be able to use the units too if scheduled beforehand. It has been a long time coming but now it should be available for use for a longer period of time. YAY!

We then returned to Sayadaw's room to offer him dana. After accepting Sayadaw's invitation to have lunch at 10:30 at Dhamma Vibhajja, we walked over to meet Ma Rupasinghi at Chanmyay Thaya Nunnery, where we have been offering annual dana for several years. As we were walking down the long alleyway to her gate, we stepped aside to let a motorcycle with two nuns being given a ride to pass when I recognized one of the nuns as Ma Rupasinghi. They stopped and she disembarked and we all returned to her nunnery where we spent an hour talking over conditions for her and the 27 nuns under her care.

Ma Rupasinghi showed us the new toilets she was having constructed as

well as the site for a new building she would like to build to house temporary nuns during the school breaks and to hold ceremony meetings during holidays. She is interested in a 30' x 40' brick building and will see how the funds come in to make that possible. We reflected on our history with her from our first visit and later when Duke and I purchased the plot of land in between two smaller pieces she owned to connect them all into one unit. Purchase of such a small amount of land now would not be possible as land costs have sky-rocketed in the area, indeed in the whole of Rangoon (Yangon). So much so that Roger has subsequently been trying to figure out the thinking of people who would be willing to pay such exorbitant prices. No can figure!

We offered Ma Rupasinghi the collected donations from the Seattle Women's Breakfast Group and the Eastside Meditation group, suggesting she could use them for whatever she prioritized as needed. After saying our goodbyes, we retraced our steps through the winding alleyway back to Shwe Oo Min to pick up our driver to walk over to Dhamma Vibhajja for lunch.

After a short wait for the lunch gong to be rung and the 20 resident yogis to file in, we entered the dining room, went through the lunch line loading a metal tray with the available food and ate in silence among the retreatants and a few monks eating with Sayadaw. It was all over in a half hour and we returned to the van for the short drive to the end of the road for our first cup of "la payay", sweet milky tea, an early afternoon boost before the afternoon visits to nuns.

We left the cafe and entered the adjacent driveway to Chanmyay Myaing Meditation Center to pick up Viranani to show us the way to two schools run by nuns. The first was familiar to us as the Appamada Pyapon School run by **Daw ???**. Were we surprised! Since last year, two new buildings had been built. One is on the site where we had considered building a two-story building to house nuns with a ceremonial gathering hall on the ground floor. We had considered constructing that building two years previously when the Stewarts traveled to Burma with us and felt moved to consider it. Now it was done.

We went upstairs to see the shrine room and the little nuns sleeping on the

floor- so cute! The Taiwanese donor, a professor, had built the building leaving the finishing to be funded by others. The shrine had been completed but the floor was partially completed upstairs and the stairwell and lower floor remain to be done. The building also includes two new, much needed, toilets. We were all so surprised and happy to see the improvement with the construction of the building.

But what was equally, maybe more, amazing was that a Japanese donor had also offered a three-story classroom building, which was completed beside the first building we'd seen. Massive in size and tightly fit into the available space, between other buildings, it had displaced the kitchen which was now temporarily housed under a corrugated roof until the new three-story kitchen was completed, being sandwiched between the two new buildings and the row of 6 toilets we'd previously built along the back property line. Now, nearly 95% of the property footage has been or is being built upon, making maximum use of available space, which means the rooms are quite dark as the sun is shaded by the nearby buildings.

The need for electricity in all buildings was acknowledged as needing future funding, as was the need for school desks, white boards, etc. But when asked, the current need was for a copy machine to make copies of all the exam papers, etc. All in all, it seems the school has been noticed, recognized as meeting a substantial need and funded to continue. The need for on-going support to pay teachers was also acknowledged. Roger and I reflected on how we had arrived on the scene shortly after opening and had helped by offering funding for the few intervening years before other large donors were able to step forward to build bigger, needed buildings. We were happy to have been able to help in the intervening early years.

Viranani then directed us down the road to a school that had only been opened last year, near to the Salon Parihitta School we had funded some years earlier. Again, Viranani was surprised when we arrived to see that two new buildings had been built since she had last seen the school. One, a multi-story classroom building, was offered by some Japanese donors and it was just being finished. The second was a smaller two-story building to house some of the 60 nuns living on site. Since the abbess was not on-site during our visit, we were not able to get the details of current

needs and projected future needs for funding. Again, Roger and I marveled at how well the nuns' schools in the area were doing attracting attention and soliciting donors for their buildings. We were very happy to see the growth and reach of the influence of the dedicated nuns caring for the poor children in their area. Marvelous.

Back in the van, we took the short ride to drop off Viranani and headed toward town. On the way we dropped off Yaminn Nwe and continued on through incessant traffic to Classique for a short nap before we were to head out for our last engagement of the day- the Shwedagon Pagoda at dusk. We entered at the western gate off U Wisara Road, an entry surrounded by well-manicured gardens. We paid the foreigners' fee of 8,000 kyats (about \$6.50) each to enter. We then took the multi-flight escalator to the main deck of the Shwedagon.

We enjoyed a leisurely stroll around the entire platform of the pagoda, stopping frequently to people watch, share life stories and discuss dhamma. All in all, this was an enjoyable stroll at dusk. Riding the escalator down to our waiting car, we acknowledged that we weren't ready for another rice and curry dinner so we returned to Classique for a beer and fried cashew nuts along with chicken vegetable soup.

Afterwards, we headed off to our rooms for correspondence before turning out our lights at 9 pm whereupon we discovered that the wi-fi wasn't working. A relief really, an excuse to call it a day, a busy and full day needing a cooling off period before beginning again in the morning. A lot got covered in our first full day. Things in Rangoon are changing rapidly everywhere on the micro as well as macro scale of life. Dhamma Everywhere.

Wednesday Dec 2, 2015

Canadian Ambassador, Yaminn New/Aye Nu Lwin, Daw Sanda

In the morning, Steve and I met with the Ambassador, Mark McDowell, along with a new employee, Philippe Tremblay, who will send us his email address. Mark will be in Vancouver late January to give a couple of talks and hopes to make time for a lunch with MBSPF supporters. It appears our new Canadian government will empower our embassies and that aid

will be less trade related. He expects more cooperation under the UN umbrella and other multinational organizations.

Ambassador McDowell commented that things here seem to be calm and going quite smoothly. With the large victory by the NLD, there is a lot of goodwill for the new government. This should last a while. His concern is that they not move too quickly and try to do too much. They did not run on any issues or platform, just the popularity of Aung San Suu Kyi. The military influence will have to be reduced gradually over time with no recriminations. Things are quiet with the Rohingya and sadly this is not an issue within the country.

Getting money here from Canada remains a problem for all and Mark asked me to write the Minister of Trade plus a Mr. Fast about this issue. While foreign investment is large, many businesses are waiting until the rules of law are clarified. The bureaucracy will likely remain intact but change will occur at the senior level of each state. There is talk about Mandalay becoming a more important business hub, especially for the Chinese. Real estate, which is very expensive at the top end, is expected to come down. With new buildings in Yangon now starting to be completed, there are already some vacancies and a lot more will be completed next year.

Regarding our submissions to their Facebook page, he was not sure what happened and asked us to resend our stories to Philippe. Their site is the second most popular site among all the Canadian embassies. Mark is still talking about coming to a school opening, official or unofficial. Maybe we will be able to arrange this for next year. I think we are lucky to have him here and he is supportive of the work we do.

Next, Steve went off with Yamin Whe and I went to the gym, my first time doing that here. The surprise was they had a sauna but since it is like a sauna outside, I did not try it. We finished the day with a visit to Daw Sanda with U Hla Maung and his family, always special.

The nunnery in Yangon is filled with 81 nuns who chanted for us on our arrival. At Pyapon, there are 40 nuns and 250 students. They are just finishing a 2 story building there which they will use for grades 7/8/9. The

cement floor in the classroom we built 7 years ago has to be redone. The bigger challenge is at Moby where over 60 nuns live in difficult conditions. It is a poor area and the majority of the nuns come from Pao. The school floods several times a year and they showed us a video of the children swimming and playing in the water having a wonderful time. It would go viral on YouTube. They have two 2 story buildings 25' by 25', and a 30' by 60' one story.

Daw Sanda would like to build a 30' by 60' two-story building, which might cost 400/500 lakhs. Her brother, who has helped with our buildings in the past, could help again. No commitments were made but both U Hla Maung and I showed some interest and likely will have additional discussions. Daw Sanda visits Moby every week because of the need. She does such good work in a very non-assuming but impressive way and has been a joy to work with over the years.

We have an early start tomorrow so we are off for an early dinner.

Thursday Dec 3, 2015

Belin

Ahhh, the day has arrived for the dreaded trip to Belin. I say dreaded because it requires leaving Classique at 4 am and we often do not return until 8 or 9 pm. So it is a long day with a 4.5 hour drive each way and many schools to visit. We have been going to the Belin area for 5-6+ years. We initially went there because of Belin Sayadaw, a monk at the monastery where Steve stayed for 5 years back in the late '80's. Now an elder, Belin Sayadaw was originally from that area and many devotees of his live there and he is deeply respected and appreciated by them. He does what he can to facilitate community development, and the nunnery and monastery to care for the orphans. The first year we visited three school campuses. I say campus because many of them have grown to include a primary and secondary school, as well as an assembly hall, a pre-kindergarten room, and enough toilets for all the kids, who collectively now total more than 1,000 at 7 campuses. One village even has a high school of three rooms.

On this trip, we had asked Thi Thi Win to accompany us. She is a car parts

saleswoman who was educated in Singapore and speaks several languages. She is a ball of fire, excitedly sharing her life, which is not an easy one caring for elderly parents including a 90 year old mother with paralysis after a stroke. But Thi Thi Win's understanding of karma and parental obligations and filial devotion knows no bounds. She is exceptional in her energy, bright mindedness and devotion to dhamma. So, when we asked, of course she was able to find a way to accompany us. It helps that Daw Khin Aye Kyaw, Sayadaw's kappiya or attendant, and an employee of the immigration department, is one of her good friends.

Leaving Classique at 4am after a cup of tea only, Sai Oo, the Classique driver par excellence, navigated our way to Thi Thi Win's to pick her up and then out of town we went. After an hour+ we arrived at the intersection of the highway with the road to Hse Main Gon, U Pandita's forest meditation center where Belin Sayadaw is currently overseeing the 2 month foreigners retreat. He and Daw Khin Aye Kyaw were to meet us at the intersection and, after a short wait, they arrived and we all piled into the van. Sayadaw riding shotgun in the front, Steve and Roger in the two middle seats and Thi Thi Win with Daw Khin Aye Kyaw in the back seats, behind which were bags, carrying baskets, containers, and coolers of food for breakfast and other necessities.

Driving north toward Bago, we turned east at Bago and headed out across a vast river flood plain of farming. We are always going across that plain as the sun begins to brighten the sky ahead of us and before long we are meeting the first farmers heading to their fields for the days work. Often they are working in big groups, one field at a time whether planting, harvesting or whatever the season requires. Now they are preparing fields and planting them with what we believe is rice, mostly.

In the far distance ahead of us, the hazy outline of the mountains gradually emerges with the lifting of the fog. But before we get there, we stop at the same roadside cafe/restaurant and piling out, we set up Sayadaw's table and offer him his first meal of the day, which Daw Khin Aye Kyaw and Ma Thi Thi Win have brought. Kalya of Classique had also prepared sandwiches and fruit for us and we order sweet milky tea, "la payay" to accompany breakfast. Today, Thi Thi Win had made vermicelli noodles, which we complemented with tea and a banana from Kalya. Sayadaw had

a variety of foods to select from.

Lingering for 30-40 minutes allowed us time to eat, visit the toilet across the street, walk out onto the bamboo bridge spanning the irrigation ditch behind the restaurant, watch the long line of young monks file past on their alms round, and purchase a few caged birds to release, who promptly return to their trainer who will re-cage them for future sales later in the day. Sayadaw release several and then we were back on the bus for the second half of the trip to Belin.

Gradually, as we move along the highway we come into roadside villages and larger towns. As we arrive within an hour of Belin, we pass the turn off to Kyaitiyo, the location of the iconic large golden rock perched precariously atop a steep ridge. One of the most famous of Burmese holy sites, last year we finally made our first visit to it and discovered it to be a clamorous beehive of activity of sales, pilgrims, pavilions, tourists, and devout Burmese Buddhists. We pass by this year hoping to keep the trip a bit shorter this time. Finally, we turn the corner onto the mile or so roadway to the Belin monastery and the schools that we will visit.

Pulling into the monastery driveway, we are greeted by all the novice monks lined up to pay respects to Sayadaw, along with villagers from several of the villages we will visit. It is traditional for us to stop here first, where we are ushered into the assembly hall of the monastery where the villagers and the novices chant and pay respects to Sayadaw.

After a short admonition by Sayadaw and a discussion of the itinerary of the day, we are back into the truck for our first school visit. Because there are now 7 school campuses and the names of the villages are initially hard to remember, we have named them Belin #1, which was the first school we visited years ago, Belin #2 and so forth. Today, we are starting at Belin #4, Lake Kone Gyi (Big Turtle Back) village.

On the 15 minute drive to the village, we are diverted off to the side of the road twice to pass by areas where the recent monsoon rains flooded out the road and wiped out bridges, which are now being re-built. One was a rather large concrete bridge, which was painstakingly being disassembled with sledgemothers, and hand chisels chipping the concrete away from

the rebar. Meanwhile, teams of women were assembling the round rebar cages that would be placed into the deep cylindrical holes being dug with a unique machine boring the appropriate sized cylindrical hole into the embankment on either side of the stream, which luckily, now was not flowing as they were heading into the dry season. It looked to be a labor-intensive, months long project, which the villagers needed to complete before the next rainy season starts so that they can have reliable connection between villages.

When we arrived at the entrance of the playground field of the school compound, a dozen or so villagers who had accompanied us on motor bikes dismounted to assist Sayadaw out of the van and to guide him through the parallel lines of students: boys on the left, girls on the right, all paying anjali respect to Sayadaw. Due to the heat of the bright sun, it was decided to drive Sayadaw ahead to the shade of the trees around the assembly hall where we would meet the villagers. Steve, Roger and others walked the length of students to greet, comment, speak with, play with and generally have a good time with them during their short break from classes to greet us. It is always so impressive to meet the villagers and the kids in this way. We have videos and photos galore of such greeting meetings, which occur at every school compound.

Arriving at the assembly hall, we are ushered into our respective seats around a food-laden table of fruits, drinks, snacks, etc. and for the next 15-20 minutes we are told what they were able to do with the funds we offered them this year. And even though we had told Sayadaw that this would be our last year coming to Belin unless another benefactor came forth, because funds were not available to do all that is needed every place we visit, we were still told about remaining smaller items needing funding, eg. ceilings, water tanks, etc. But here, like at the first 5 Belin schools campuses, all the buildings are built or renovated. And like all property, there is the endless need for repairs, maintenance, etc.

After their sharing of what they're able to do and what remains to be funded, we went outside to look at the buildings: a pre-kindergarten room and the three room high school building which they are in the process of finishing with the funds we offered them. After the building viewing and a few short goodbyes, we were back on the bus and heading out to two new

Belin area, Lake Kone Gyi schools that we had never visited before. These were called Lake Kone Gyi #2/Belin #6 and Lake Kone Gyi #3/Belin #7. These were two smaller school campuses of primary school only with partially constructed pre-kindergarten rooms at LKG #2/Belin #6, and a bamboo with thatch roof temporary building needing replacement with a cement building at LKG #3/Belin #7 village.

And so the day went, these three villages and a stop at Belin #1, Maung Palin, a Pa'O tribal village where we were greeted by students dressed in their traditional ethnic clothing performing a dance for us and a review of the complete pre-K room and the renovation being done in the primary school building. Then we had a break for lunch, back at the monastery assembly hall, where the local teachers and village women had prepared a sumptuous meal for us all. We spent an hour + there eating, cleaning up and resting a bit before heading out for the afternoon visit to Belin #2, Hnin Pale, a large school compound where we had funded construction of a 30' X 70' classroom building this year and Belin #5/Hnin Pale Primary School where we saw the variety of renovations we had funded over the past two years totally transforming the school compound. Our final visit of the day to Belin #3/ Hnan Tha Myaing: a small primary school adjacent to the monastery where we had offered funds to complete the pre-K room and to start the framing of a small assembly hall.

Given that this could very well be our last funding of and visit to the Belin area and the school campuses we have funded there, it is beneficial to recount the challenges and the accomplishments of the 5-6 years of investment we've made in their educational system. Unlike most other school sites, we found and funded these schools through a Sayadaw that Steve knew when a monk in Burma. And while the list of schools has grown in the area, Sayadaw would annually allocate the funds we offered to fund some improvements at each of the applying schools. Over the course of the years of funding, all of the campuses have undergone significant transformations to fully functional, new or newly renovated buildings with adequate toilets for teachers and students and the changes in the buildings are reflected in the improved general appearance of the school grounds.

While we never were able to track the funds disbursement on an ongoing

basis due to inadequate English language skills, and lack of communication facilities, we were always presented with detailed estimates of what was needed and upon return, detailed records of how the funds were spent. We never did find out who the contractors were, or whether the villagers helped at each site. Some sites, we had heard they did, but at other sites they had not. Still, the villagers and the teachers and we can presume the students, were very happy to have greatly improved school building, grounds, facilities, etc.

By going back year after year, what initially looked to be hopelessly underfunded and deteriorating school compounds have been transformed. This is the only area where we have gone and continued to go year after year to fund needed facilities as funds became available. At most other sites, we spend one year building one school building and move on to another site the following year. (Pweyedaung near Pyin Oo Lwin is the major exception where we have built several buildings over several years.)

Over the course of our time of funding these sites, we have seen some slight increase in government funding of school facilities too, which is very welcome, though in all honesty, our schools are better constructed and cost much less. We are very happy to have stayed year after year supporting Sayadaw to upgrade most of the schools under his guidance. We clearly see the benefit of a respected elder monastic to help shepherd the resources equitably among competing claims and over many years to bring them all up to speed and functionality. We are happy to have funded these projects.

Below is a recounting of the accomplishments of 2015 at each Belin school as well as the ongoing needs we were reminded of during our visit:

Belin #1, Naung Palin (54 lakhs = 5400,000 kyats= approx. \$5,400)

- Room dividers, ceiling tiles in primary classroom, completion of pre-K room

Belin #2, Hnin Pale (232 lakhs= 23200,000 kyats= approx. \$23,300)

- New 30' X 130' classroom building. (Need 62 lakhs to finish)

Belin #3, Hnan Tha Myaing (46 lakhs= approx. \$4,600)

- Fences along both sides of property, ceiling tiles, entry ceramic tiles

- Need 20-30 lakhs to complete a 30' X 40' building for library and assembly hall.

Belin #4, Lake Kone Gyi #1 (87 lakhs= approx. \$8,700)

- Doors, window, materials & labor, water tank and painting for HS and Pre-K building
- Need 10-15 lakhs to finish both buildings, and 10-15 lakhs to install electricity in both buildings

Belin #5, Hnin Pale Primary School, (70 lakhs= approx \$7,000)

- Windows, ceiling, new galvanized roof.
- Need 4 lakhs to finish remaining windows.

Belin #6, Lake Kone Gyi #2 (new this year)

- Need \$2,000 to finish construction of pre-K building windows, floor, ceiling & painting for 16 students

Belin #7, Lake Kone Gyi #3

- Need \$10, 000 to construct new cement building to replace bamboo Pre-K 30' X 35' for 35 pre-K students.

Summary For Belin #1-5:

- Total spent in 2015 = 494 lakhs, approx \$50,000
- Need 126 lakhs in 2016, approx.

It was a long ride back, but Sai Oo is a skillful driver with whom we all felt safe and it was 8 pm when we arrived back at Classique for chicken noodle soup that we had called ahead to have prepared for our arrival. Long day of good feelings.

Friday Dec 4, 2015

Hse Main Gon Lunch dana, School visit

Awake early, we were out to offer rice to the monks from Panditarama at 6:20 am and had our breakfast before we were to head out to pick up Thi Thi Win to translate for us when we visited a school compound nearby Hse Main Gon where we were going to offer lunch dana. Along with Thi Thi Win, we picked up an Indian real estate woman who tells fortunes. We also had an opportunity to meet once again with Thi Thi Win's hyperactive sister, the doctor, and her 90 year old father. We arrived about 7:30am and after a brief, hi-energy greeting we were back on the bus heading to Hse Main Gon Forest Meditation Center. It takes about an hour and a half to

reach Hse Main Gon.

After arriving at Hse Main Gon, we were met by Belin Sayadaw and another Sayadaw from Nepal who would be taking us to visit a school nearby that needed some building done. We drove back along the road we came in on about a mile or two and turned left and drove for a mile along dirt farm roads past an egg factory and we were told there was a sewing factory nearby too. We arrived at the school compound of Thè Phyu Chaung village with a population of 1,300. There was a large playground field and a small old classroom building in which there were 108 students in K-4 now. While the building was in disrepair, it looked salvageable but we decided we'd need Maung Maung Gyi to come take a look to determine the need, enlist the villagers' support and evaluate the old building's structural worthiness.

The villagers would like a new 30' X 90' classroom building and to increase the school to K-8, adding middle school classes. There are currently 4 teachers and while there is no grid electricity, they do have an artisan well and a generator to run the pump to get an adequate supply of water. There are currently 6 water toilets and a secondary building housing a library and teacher office. There is a makeshift bamboo open air shed for the guard and a ramshackle, dirt floor, leaky roof shed with a single solar powered light for 3 teachers who live on-site, one of whom had been there 3 years and one 2 years.

The villagers offered to assist the building crew and to cook for them. There are currently 54 girls and 54 boys attending school and if the new classrooms were built, students currently traveling to a further village would come to this one instead. The Headmaster is Daw Win Ma and the village headman is Kyawa Kyaw Htun. After explaining to the villagers what our process is and that we were just starting out on our trip, we told them that we'd like our contractor to come look at the project and we would later make our decision and let them know. The children came out of their classrooms to chant to us before leaving and we were back in the bus to return to Hse Main Gon for the lunchtime meal offering.

There we were met by Vajiranani who took us into the dining room though the kitchen area and we offered the tables of food to an attending monk.

Later as the foreign retreatants were filing in for the meal, Steve went with Vajiranani to greet Ma Kalyanañānī, the former Tsu-Yin Chang, a student of his from Seattle who had come to Burma to ordain as a nun, undertake the 2 month foreigners retreat with U Pandita, and to stay on in Burma practicing with others if possible or staying at Panditarama as necessary. After the students had finished serving themselves, we all got our own plates of food to eat at tables off to the side. It is most amazing and dramatic to be in a dining room of 150 people eating and hear scarcely any noise and almost no substantial movement, as everyone is moving at a snail's pace in silence.

After lunch, we went to the office to offer the funds for the dana meal which amounted to \$420, and for an additional 50,000 kyats (about \$38) we were able to offer a cold drink to all the retreatants later in the afternoon. We then went to see Sayadaw U Pandita who was just finishing up his meal and listened in as a businessman from Singapore took his leave of Sayadaw.

When it was our turn, Sayadaw spoke to us for 40 minutes or so about SQ, not IQ, nor EQ-Emotional quotient but SQ which refers to *sekka* or the trainings of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *pañña*, or mindfulness. He also spoke of the many benefits of practicing dana; giving of food and drink also gives strength, beauty, energy, wisdom, health, etc. which the donor also receives from the practice of dana. Steve offered dana from he and Kamala and gave Sayadaw his card from Kamala. Sayadaw looked at the writing on the outside of the envelope and inquired whether it was Kamala's handwriting, (it was) and commented how clear her handwriting was. Sayadaw later commented on the qualities of a good teacher and that one could not teach without them, though one could share their experiences as a *kalyana mitta* (spiritual friend).

After leaving Sayadaw's room, Steve went to offer dana to Belin Sayadaw and spoke briefly before Thi Thi Win and the fortune teller arrived to spend some time with Belin Sayadaw. Later, we all boarded the bus and after dropping the two women off, we proceeded on to Classique. We had a couple hours before we wanted to go out to eat, so we worked on our correspondence and later inquired about the Italian restaurant at the Sedona hotel, which is where we decided to go. Again, it was an

exceptionally good meal at resort prices, but it was totally enjoyable as a venue for our Yangon wrap meal.

Saturday Dec 5, 2015

Steve: Non-work day: Roger played golf with Kyaw Thet, the #2 Minister of Religion and a Construction Government official; there were no locals at the golf club, an expensive enclave. Steve stayed around Classique to do correspondence and nurse an upset stomach. Dinner at Classique.

Roger: Not a work day for me as I was gone most of the day with Kyaw Thet at Pan Hlaing, a very up market golf course surrounded by million dollar homes and condos. There was a party going on there and I didn't see many locals. It was in the 90's and a lot of water was drunk with no bathroom stops. I am pleased to report that I parred the front but worse on the back. I played with the number 2 man in the Government responsible for religion and also an important Government construction person. They were friendly but we had little talk about anything other than golf and neither of them spoke much English.

Steve wasn't feeling well so stayed near Classique and did paper work. Dinner was in and Steve had his usual chicken soup that seemed to sit well.

We are off to Kalaw early tomorrow; we leave Classique at 4:15am. It will be sad to go. We have been treated so well and kindly, especially by Kalya. She would be difficult to replace and seems like family.

Sunday Dec 6, 2015

Trip to Kalaw, Pindaya Cave, Seven Sisters

An early start as we left Classique at 4:15 am with Kyaw Tet taking us to the airport, very kind of him. All the planes seem to leave at the same time on the same route. We went via Mandalay and Bagan where we were delayed for almost 2 hours because of fog in Heho.

We arrived in Heho at 10:30am to be met by Ernest, driver, and, surprise, Sunshine from last year's visit. She was our tour guide today as no

schools are open on Sunday so we visited Pindaya which is famous for the caves with almost 9,000 Buddhas, something to behold but eventually too many for me. The views over the valley from the entrance were gorgeous. This is probably the most attractive and fertile area that we visit.

We had a lovely lunch at the Green Tea restaurant overlooking the lake. Guess what we drank? Steve's stomach problems must be over as he ordered several courses. The food was good and not that expensive.

Next we did the usual tourist visit to the umbrella factory to see how they were made from mulberry bark and bamboo. It was hard not to enjoy the visit; the people were so friendly with the result that my carry-on now has 2 small umbrellas.

Arrived in Kalaw at 4pm staying at the Honey Pine as usual. It gets cold when the sun goes down. I am writing this under a comforter as there is no heat in any of the rooms, quite a contrast from the 90's in Yangon. The good news is we get to go to the 7 Sisters for dinner every night, the best meals on the trip.

Ernest seems well and is very happy working with us. Both of his sons help out, one making furniture and the other supervising construction. We will meet his granddaughter who is staying with him after finishing her second year of university. We are sponsoring her and she is studying English and computers, which seems like a good combination. The grandson is not doing as well, pumping gas in a service station.

Ernest said that almost everyone was surprised but happy with the election. The changeover is not expected until April but discussions are now underway. Prices for basics have not risen much, the opposite of Yangon. However buyers from Yangon have pushed up house prices dramatically.

Work begins tomorrow with visits to completed and potential schools accompanied by a number of officials.

Monday, Dec 7, 2015

Around Kalaw: Ywa Daw Silver Jubilee celebration of school opening, visits to two overcrowded schools, looking for another hotel in Kalaw

After fitful nights sleep in the refrigerators of our rooms, we both were up early and headed out for “la payay and jagway” – sweet milky tea and fried raised dough. Found them in a shop at 6:30am on the main drag through Kalaw. Sat inside the street-side shop complaining about the Honey Pine rooms and Roger’s attempt to say 6 nice things about the night. #1 was, “we’re going to find another hotel later today!” That’s nice! Evidently the old lady in the shop felt some compassion for us and brought a charcoal fire in a ceramic pot to us so we could warm ourselves over it while sipping hot tea and complaining. What a start to the day.

Back at Honey Pine we went to breakfast: weak tea, Tang, white bread toast and “eggs”? Nothing has changed since last year. Finally, Ernest came at 8:30 and we piled into the bus and were on our way to Ywa Daw where we had build a 5 room school in a large field, a new plot of land for the school compound of the village. Today was a celebration of the Silver anniversary of the school. It was a festive occasion with students dressed in their traditional Shan, Pa’O, Taungyeo, and Shan-Denu clothing and eventually performing on the large stage set up for the celebration. Everything was being videoed including dignitaries such as the local Senator, District School official, the village headman, etc. and us walking the greeting line of students and villagers.

There was a long list of events to take place on the stage and they sat us right in front of the loud speakers, which were way over-amplified to a painful degree. We sat there for a couple hours listening to speeches and Steve had to give one too. Sunshine was there to translate for us as there were many conversations going on at once most of the time. Lots of students were awarded prizes for their test scores, and every ethnic group performed some traditional dance routine. By noon, we were invited to eat in a large room filled with tables laden with food and we sat down with the dignitaries and villagers for a meal. Soon after, we were able to make our exit after Roger had offered the 5 teachers of the school perfume and cosmetic cases he had brought. He only later told Steve, after they were about to leave, that he had also offered the kids some Frisbees. “What?!”

and he didn't let Steve show or teach them how to throw them? How can they ever learn on their own?

OK, back on the bus, the District Education Officer had a couple village schools to show us where he would like a new classroom building built. After a 30-minute drive over farm ox-cart tracks through lush valleys and distant hillsides with a great variety of crops in various stages of growth (something like Tuscany might have been 100 years ago! – beautiful, pastoral, idyllic!) we drove through a village to the school compound in OoMin village.

Situated on 3+ acres of land was a 20 year old, small: 26' X 40' school building housing 100 kids in 5 grades! It was way over-crowded. In speaking with the village chief and school headmistress, we learned that they needed a new 30' X 120', 4-room building: 3 classrooms and a teacher office/room. The compound has a spring-fed water tank which doesn't run dry in the summer; so we named this the "spring-fed tank school" to help us remember it. After awhile on these trips with viewing so many school compounds and seeing so much need, it all runs together into a blur and it has been difficult to remember individual schools unless some distinctive characteristic or event happens there.

We closed our time with the teachers and village leaders by inspecting the school, which also needed a new roof and ceiling. We acknowledged their need and told them how we were searching for schools to build and depending upon the funds available, would be making our decisions by the end of the year and would notify Ernest to let them know.

Back in the bus, we continued our exploration of the hillsides and farmland through the low mountains around Kalaw, driving through several subsistence farming villages and eventually coming to another school compound in the village of Pyay Pwe Hla Shwe Gone with a population of 1,000 and a small 40 year old, 22' X 50' school building housing 153 students in Grades 1-5! Since the day was rather pleasant, some classes were being held outside because the building is way over-crowded! We looked around talking with the headmistress Daw Win Sandar and the village chief. We looked at the white ant destruction along one side of the

building and determined it could be repaired. It is a large 2.9-acre compound with additional land available on two sides.

Clearly a new building is needed to house the students and we discussed the wisdom of building a 30' X 120', 4-room (3 classrooms and teacher office) or a 30' X 150', 6 room (5 smaller classrooms and a small teacher office) to increase the classes from 1st-5th to 1st through 7th grades. The District Educational Officer approved of the smaller rooms and increasing the school to include grades 6 & 7.

We inquired about teacher housing and heard that three teachers live in a bamboo shed in the village, about a 10 minute walk away. We went to look and, predictably, saw a pretty poor place to dwell with two single female teachers on one half of an 18' X 27' bamboo shed and a teacher, her husband and baby on the other half. We noticed right beside this shed, an old cement building, which, we were told, was formerly a UN Kindergarten but it was no longer used as such.

Ernest mentioned that such a building in another location was given to the village to use as they saw fit and Ernest offered to inquire of his friend who works for the UN whether this building could be converted into a teacher housing. If so, it would require repair of the windows and doorway along with installation of a dividing wall. Together, these improvements would make much better housing for the three teachers at a much less cost than construction of an entire new building.

The villagers offered the brick, sand, water and labor to help build the school if we would decide to fund it and after further discussion with the school and village leaders, again told them of our process in selecting villages to build schools in and that we would let them know at the end of the year. They mistakenly thought we meant the end of the Burmese year (April 20th) instead of the calendar new year. With that clarification, we were back in the bus for the ride back to Kalaw.

Earlier in the day, Roger had given Sunshine the task of finding us another hotel, one with heaters in the rooms, reliable wi-fi, and, if possible, breakfast buffet. She was going to search after returning to Kalaw. Back in Kalaw, Roger and Steve headed out to walk around town a bit just to get

some exercise and after a half hour strolling the streets of Kalaw, nearing the Honey Pine hotel, came upon Sunshine, Ernest and the driver at a café looking for us.

We then walked with Sunshine to look at the Seint Hotel, which is right behind the Honey Pine. They had rooms available with heaters (though they look pretty small to heat a cold, big room) and being on the ground floor right next to the registration desk, had reliable wi-fi. We told them we'd make a decision by 7 pm when we'd stop by on our way to the 7 Sisters for dinner and let them know if we'd take the rooms for two nights and move over in the morning. This still left us with another night in the Honey Pine refrigerator.

After saying goodbye to Sunshine, we went into our rooms for a couple hours correspondence and some exercise before we headed to the 7 Sisters for a surprise menu.

Tuesday December 8

2015 Kyi Kone opening, visits to a high school, three remote villages

We had our usual milky tea and jagway at our favourite Muslim tea shop at 6:30 am. They bring a small charcoal fire to our table to warm us. We hope this small step will help in reducing religious conflict. To cover all bases, I bought a small gold Buddha in the market or I think it is gold. Steve bought a new batch of antibiotics for less than a dollar, good price. Back to the hotel for breakfast, yuck, and then Ernest and his team picked us up at 8:30 am. Somehow we ended up with about 10 of us including government officials.

Our first stop was Kyi Kone, the first school MBSPF built in the Kalaw area. We were greeted by a band and a line of almost 200 children. It was like a holiday for the village and all the parents showed up. There was a big ceremony with gifts, speeches, and dancing. Quite a sight.

However what we saw was the BIG surprise. Last year there were 2 old brick buildings and a bamboo hut. Now, in addition to our beautiful new school, there were 2 additional government schools under construction. They will be completed by the next school year and grades 9 and 10 will

be added and possibly a full high school after that. Some people told us that all of that happened because of us. Not sure if that is true but the possibility sure makes us happy.

Our friend Steve continues to battle a chest infection but distinguished himself by wrapping his head in a towel the way the Pao here do. The good news was he didn't dance like last year but everybody wanted their picture taken with him. All in all, it was a very joyful visit.

Next stop was a very large school on a small piece of land with over 1,000 students in Anyang Pin Htaung that the Senator from Shan State asked us to visit. He travels with us most of the time and is very supportive. However, they wanted a 4 over 4 two storey high school. This is too big a project for us and would be a challenge for our team. It was left that they will look for another donor to share the cost with us and then get back to us. It's unlikely we will do anything here but the Senator appreciated our visit.

Our next stop was Pin Mei where we built a teachers' cottage for 6 and replaced the roof on one of the school buildings. The old teachers' cottage was one of the worst we had ever seen. The teachers need beds before they move in which we agreed to supply. They also asked for solar and are short of water and need a better collection system or a new well. No commitment was made. The village chief was very helpful and went with us on our visits the rest of the day.

The next visits were a delight. We drove up into the hills to 3 small villages that all needed two room 40' by 30' schools. They are within half an hour drives from each other. We have nicknames for all possible schools now to keep them straight. These three are:

1. Prepared Platform School. They are all ready for us to go.
2. Unesco School. It was built by them in 2001.
3. Great View School. Guess why, though they all could be called that.

There are 40-60 students in each school and the only school with a useable building, Unesco school, would be turned into a middle school for the other two, grades 6/7/8. Currently, the children have to walk over an

hour to get to the middle school at Pin Mei and most don't.

The villagers are poor and their major crops are potatoes and ginger. They all showed up at each school and remained sitting outside while we met. The beauty of the surroundings plus the obvious need and the hard working parents will make it difficult to say no to these people. We were very warmly welcomed at each location and served lunch while we were there.

This day we were offered tea and snacks at 6 schools, a challenge for the system. What did we do at the end of the day, but back to 7 Sisters for dinner again. That's it for a busy day with detailed notes written on possible new schools.

Wednesday, December 9, 2015

Visit to Kamparni school, Meeting with Senator and Education official, visit to clinic site, lunch with gang and Rosie, wrap-up meeting with Ernest

We had a slower start today after our first night in the Seint Hotel. Great wi-fi, low heat only in Steve's room, very noisy, predictable breakfast buffet. We speculated over breakfast that there is a need for a warm, good wi-fi, cheap hotel in town but remembered it is mostly young trekkers staying over and they aren't the big spenders. So, we may be stuck with what we've seen. But we might take a cue from Ernest who has neither heat nor hot water in his home, and get an electric blanket or mattress pad or a portable room heater. "La payay" and jagway at the roadside shop where the old matron brings a glowing charcoal pot to put at our feet to help warm our hands a bit. We like her.

Ernest came by at 9 am for the drive to Kamparni where we had built a 30' X 120' school this year. It was a difficult project because it is impossible to reach in the rainy season and there is no water otherwise. They have a decrepit catchment system only and it dries up fairly quickly. We noticed how much in disrepair the collection and storage system was at the school compound. And, in fact, after driving an hour across rugged, less fertile outback land, we were met by only a few families and some of the school children. We looked around a bit, met in the teachers' office (one large

room of the new building, having moved out of a smaller, dingy room in one of the wooden school buildings).

All in all, the whole village seemed depressed, lacking spirit and a bit drifty and vague. Strange feeling there. Ernest too had acknowledged that his crew had received very little help from the villagers when they were building there. The village chief seemed rather timid and weak and Ernest told us that the whole life of the village depends upon the chief. A strong, capable, clear, and energetic chief can empower and organize the entire village in collaborative efforts. But it wasn't happening here. We met with the teachers and a few villagers along with the District Education Officer. We spoke, he spoke and the village chief spoke. We then asked the teachers if they had any questions for us. The headmistress requested: desks, benches for all the students, solar collector, storage system and a DVD player with screen (\$800), and a new cover for the water storage tank.

After tea and thanks, we went outside to look at the water system and tank cover. The whole system is in disrepair and the water tank cover was in complete breakdown with gaping holes in the old corrugated roofing originally covering it. The attached pump was also broken and no longer used and the meager water in the tank was filthy, with debris floating on top of it. The water for cooking, bathing, and drinking for all of the teachers living on site and the students is pulled up by a rope attached to a 1-2 gallon metal can.

After handing out cosmetic kits to the teachers and a few Frisbees to the few kids in the yard, we were back in the van for the ride back to town where we discussed what might be done to help the village with a dependable water supply. Over the past few days, we had seen a new big hi-speed rotary drill truck in town at a couple different places and we wondered about getting it to go out to the remote village and drill a well. Ernest told us it was in town drilling at the expense of the KBZ bank.

In Aung Ban, we met with the Senator U Myat Soe, District Education Officer U Thein Kyaw Aye, and the village chief of Kyi Kone, U Tin Maung over tea. We discussed their priority listing of the 6 school compounds we had seen with them. We are waiting for or investigating additional funding

for the high school in Aung Ban. The two schools we saw on the first day were their priority and the three small villages each needing a small 30' X 40' were our priority.

The funding available in 2016 will probably limit our construction to only two of the three (considering the 3 small villages as one). In addition, we also have a clinic being talked about last year and reconsidered this year. The Senator explained the budgeting process in the legislature and that the decision on funding would be complete in early April by which time we would know if the Department of Education was going to build any of the schools we had looked at. In the end, we decided we'd build the school at the "classrooms under the trees" compound, as it seemed to need space for students the most. Then we'd see if the government was going to fund any of the others. If not, we'd likely go with the three small schools- considered as one, ie "3 in 1" schools.

After all the school talk, we spoke about the water situation at Kamparni. The Senator was aware of the situation there and in fact mentioned that he had had a small dirt dam built to retain water and he had constructed a large holding tank for the village too. We were surprised that the village headman did not tell us nor did Ernest know. Hmmm. We inquired whether the Senator could help Kamparni get the large rotary drill truck to go there to drill a well. He told us that the KBZ Bank was responsible for the drilling truck being in town and that he would look into it. We said our goodbyes amid appreciative acknowledgements of collaborative efforts amongst us all.

We headed into Kalaw and picked up the Hospital Administrator who went with us 40 minutes out of town to review the clinic site. We were familiar with the situation and need but we re-confirmed everything for an accurate re-appraisal of the project. We met there with the village headman and a couple others; saw that they had since last year carved a large platform for building out of a steep hillside. We discussed the need, location, services to be offered and timing of construction before the Hospital Administrator again made her appeal that we build a school in her native village about 3 hours away. We listened patiently, knowing that the distance made it quite unlikely that we would build her school. Then we were back in the trucks heading to Kalaw for a very late lunch.

We decided to try the new café/restaurant “JR” nearby our new hotel and we moved in and ordered. Soon, Rosie, Ernest’s granddaughter who we have been supporting to go to university for the past two years, came by to meet us. We spent an enjoyable mealtime with her and Sunshine discussing her schooling, ambitions, lifestyle and needs. She needs a computer and after a short discussion and the fact that she does all Ernest’s emailing of messages, requests for money, and photos to us from a computer shop downtown, we decided our Kalaw division needed a computer. Ernest will look into cost and let us know. We offered Rosie the funds for another year of training and education. She appears to be very bright, capable, ambitious and level-headed.

We had a couple hours back in the Seint writing up the travelogue before deciding to head for a beer at JR’s, and then heading out to Seven Sisters for our last supper there. The place was as packed as usual and possibly because we ordered piecemeal, a la carte, from the menu, our meal took a long time arriving and there was a lot of it.

A young woman we had not seen there before brought our bill to us and we asked her about her work there. She acknowledged her name was Cindy, (Mon Mon ...) the daughter of one of the original Sisters who started the restaurant (who had since passed away) and that she had been away the past 5 years working as a flight attendant for Emirates and Kuwait Airlines. She is back now to care for her daughter who is about to start school. We also said good-bye to the other family members in the kitchen and mentioned we’d be back in a year or so, acknowledging how much we enjoyed their food when we were in Kalaw.

Back at the Seint, we both were not surprised that Roger’s room had no heat and Steve’s had barely any. Fully clothed, we got into bed for the night, happy knowing it would be our last night there.

Thursday Dec 10, 2015: fly to Mandalay, visit 6 schools we had built this year with Maung and John.

After our usual 2 breakfasts including the Muslim Cafe, we headed to the airport with Ernest and Kyaw Kyaw. This was an excellent visit except for

the cold at night. Changing hotels didn't help so the plan for next year is to have Ernest buy us heaters or continue the search for another hotel. While the fog at Heho lifted at 9, our flight to Mandalay, which was scheduled to leave at 10, left at 11:30 am. No matter, it was direct and we were met at the Mandalay airport by John, Maung and a driver.

Unfortunately, the truck we bought Maung for his work several years ago has expired. Somehow he managed to sell it for 50 lakhs. The cost of a used truck that Maung needs, a Mitsubishi Canter, is 150 lakhs. He is asking us if we could donate 100 lakhs so he has something to use instead of renting which is inconvenient and expensive. We will review this but will very likely help Maung buy a truck.

On the way to visit schools that we have built, John reviewed their work in 2015. In addition to the 6 schools they built for us, they built 3 for others for a total of 9. This kept Maung and his crew of 35 busy for the whole year, which made everyone happy.

We visited five of the new schools in the afternoon. We have pictures of all the schools but a brief summary:

Ah Shae Ngwe Toe:

A truly gorgeous school, the biggest we built, 140' by 30' in a horseshoe shape. The villagers were very helpful in bringing in fill; the site was formerly a bog. They also paid to equip the 7 rooms with lights and fans and clean up the mess. There was no garbage lying around, a big change from last year. They added Grade 8 this year and will add Grade 9 next year resulting in 100 more students.

Htan Sin Taw 1 and 2:

There are now 3 small buildings, our 2 plus an old one that the villagers will fix up. They supplied fans, lights, and a new entrance. This primary school has 120 students with 6 teachers and all are happy.

Tan Ywar or Bicycle School:

This school of over 2,000 children was in need of 3 buildings, one for each of Grade, 1, 2, and 3. They were overcrowded in 3 poorly constructed bamboo buildthatings. We built an 80' by 30' four classroom building that

holds 188 Grade 1 students, crowded but a big improvement. Like at other places, the Government built beside us. Wonderful, except the quality of the government built school doesn't compare and the cost is much higher as all the money does not go to building. So sad. Anyway, they have 2 schools now and we made no future commitments.

Pe Khin:

This school is currently under construction and it was fun to see Maung and his crew working. Steve took a video that shows the sequence. While this will be a big help to them, they are left with 4 bamboo buildings in various states of repair. They promised to repair all of them after the school is finished. They are expecting more students and will have 2 more teachers next year.

Thus finished the day and we drove back to Mandalay in the dark but we were happy to arrive at our warm hotel room. We were very pleased to have seen the much needed and well-built schools.

We had dinner on the rooftop with the traditional puppet show and music in the background. I was facing it but my dinner partner never turned around. I guess he has seen a few puppet shows over the years. Tomorrow we get to see the schools for next year.

Friday December 11, 2015

Mandalay visit to school sites for possible 2016 building

After a warm night's sleep in an air conditioned room, we were up for breakfast at the 1st floor cafeteria breakfast buffet and prepared to meet John and Maung Maung Gyi at 8:30am for the trip south to visit three schools sites selected for possible building in 2016. John had prepared booklets for us of all the schools we had built in 2015 and were to visit yesterday. One remained to be visited. Also included were the 4 schools in this area to visit to consider. Three were south of Mandalay and one is up in the mountains near Pyin Oo Lwin.

John and Maung arrived in John's truck and the other vehicle was an SUV since a couple of the sites today are off road, so to speak and too rough for a passenger car to traverse. After threading our way along the

Irrawaddy River south for a few miles, we arrived at the concrete highway, a newly built road that runs between Mandalay and Naypyidaw and on to Yangon. South of the airport, it is monotonously straight with few distractions along the route. Nevertheless, we were able to make good time and exited about an hour south of Mandalay and headed east.

We arrived at Nwar Shar Yoe village and were greeted by a large contingent of local villagers at the school compound just outside the monastery walls. We called this the “**7 building school**” since there were 7 buildings to look over and all of them were very deficient in some way. The compound is 3.7 acres so there is plenty of room. There is a bamboo and thatch teacher shed in one corner where currently 3 teachers live but more can be expected as additional teachers are assigned to this school.

The buildings are small, crowded, dark, and low ceilinged and stifling hot already in winter. By February or March the rooms will be like ovens. The High School was qualified/approved with a coat of paint and by covering up some of the worst wood rot with trim boards. One building is an old monastery building on land that the monastery gave to the village for the school. It is in very poor shape and needs to be torn down before it falls down and hurts someone. A metal frame for a small pre-K room was standing unfinished alongside a large pile of foundation rock that, we were told, was brought in to show their intent in building a better school. Luckily, the compound has 3 wells and plenty of water.

After our usual questioning of the headmaster and the village chief to acquire all the details and specifics of the village, school, compound, toilets, water, and inspection of each building, we met with the assembled villagers and were told they would like a two-story building. U Nyo Aye, the Deputy Township Education Officer (DTEO) accompanying us on this visit acknowledged that if we built one primary building of 4 rooms, 30' X 120', that he could promise that the government would build another. At the primary school level, we were told that township education officers could make that decision.

After a brief inspection of the teachers' housing, we spoke with the resident teachers and acknowledged our interest in providing the teachers with adequate housing stressing that they too needed to be safe,

comfortable and happy in order to support the important work they were doing educating the children of the village.

We were back in the cars for the 45 minute ride west to the area of the next two villages. First we stopped for lunch in a restaurant/bar where 20-25 men were sitting around tables drinking beer and hard liquor for lunch. We ordered soup, fried rice, tofu crisps, etc. and spent 45 minutes eating and talking with the officials who came to travel with us to the village: the Township Education Officer U Ko Ko, and Assistant Township Officer U Than Htun. We were joined by one village chief, U Bo Htay, the headmaster of one school, U Sein Win, and a couple other officials when we arrived at the school of our first village of Sekalay.

The road between lunch and school compound wound around and through very rough ox cart farm paths over crop fields. This school compound was very remote and small. We arrived to see a 2 acre plot with a 20' X 40' old woven-bamboo sided building with a corroding galvanized roof. There were thatch-roofed open air sheds attached at either end housing 2 additional classes to the 3 within the building housing the students in grades 1-5 and no pre-K was on-site. We call this the **“Thatch-roof wings school.”** (Sekalay)

We were greeted by a large contingent of 50-60 villagers whom we met with and spoke to after soliciting the necessary data on the village, school and needs from the headmaster and village chief. Both Roger and Steve spoke at the meetings with the villagers on this day and shared our history of building schools, our philosophy of the value of education as the “key to the unknown future” and Steve’s gratitude to the people of Burma for providing him with all his requisites for 5 years in Rangoon as a monk.

We were requested to build a 30' X 80' building when we were told that 30 children from this village travel 2 miles to go to middle school (which must be a muddy, exhausting trek in the rainy season!) A potential site for building was pointed out to us, as there is plenty of available land. There is also a need for toilets as there is currently only one on-site. But before any building could be done we were told we would need to drill a well since currently water is secured from a well at a nearby monastery and another in town. But these were not convenient for the water needed to build. We

were told that there was plenty of water available at about 200' and it would take 5 days and 10 Lakhs (less that US\$1k) to get it.

We liked this village and saw a tremendous need and being so remote had little hope that they would be on anyone's radar for a school. Back in the car, we headed off to find the second of the two remote villages of the afternoon.

After 30 minutes again over very rough farm roads or ox cart tracks, we arrived at a large monastery in the village of Saytoe (Setoe). We stopped in the monastery courtyard and were met by a large contingent of villagers and the local monk. Steve met the Sayadaw and indicated his wish to offer dana which was agreed upon after looking at the school. We called this the "**monastery dana school.**"

We all went just outside the monastery to the school compound to see two buildings. One was a galvanized roofed, semi-open air, brick knee-wall only pavilion on a cement floor with woven-bamboo walled gable ends where classes for grades 1-3 were held. The other was an old, very narrow, dark and hot building for classes in grades 4-9. We were met again by a large contingent of very interested villagers, lots of kids and the school and community officials. We again solicited the necessary data about the school, village, and need.

We were told the village would like to remove the partial building and build a new 30' X 80' primary school for 4 classrooms. We also saw the possibility of improving the small dark building by installing windows above the doors, putting in a ceiling for cooling and partitions to deaden the sound a bit. Clearly there is a need for more classrooms and there is plenty of available land to build upon and we were told that students from 5 other villages came to the middle school here.

After the school inspection, Steve went with the Sayadaw to the monastery and was followed by a large group of villagers upstairs to pay respects to the Sayadaw and the Buddha. We were graciously served tea, snacks and small talk for a few minutes before Steve offered financial support to the monk and monastery before we all packed up to leave.

Upon standing to leave, the villagers offered us a couple large bags of peanuts, some boiled, some raw, some corn and other gifts from the monastery or the villagers themselves. These went into the back of the vehicle with the intent to distribute them to a monastery of others in need of them.

By late afternoon we were back in the trucks for the 1.5 hour drive back to the hotel arriving just after stopping off at a pharmacy to get throat lozenges for both of us, in the dark. Again, Steve and Roger ate on the rooftop restaurant offering a puppet show with dinner and we were soon into bed.

Saturday Dec 12, 2015

visit to last potential 2016 school in Pyin Oo Lwin, visit to seamstresses.

Roger had an unpleasant night's sleep, has a delicate belly and a sore throat so he decided to stay in town and rest up while Steve took the drive up to Pyin Oo Lwin with Maung and John. Maung had rigged up a canopy over the back of John's p/u truck and John had supplied a half dozen zafu pillows to accompany a mattress Maung had put in the back. John took the back for the first half ride up the hill and Steve took the back after the "lapayay" stop, halfway up the hill.

We drove through Pyin Oo Lwin and through the Military Officers Training School compound to reach the site of the primary school in Naung Kyan Gyi. Noticeably, the compound has a large (330' X 150') athletic field between the road and the school building. John has visions of a football field surrounded by a cinder track for field events and regional competitions among local schools to take place here. He has secured a pledge of \$10K to do something that makes a difference and the use of a bulldozer to level the large field. A bit more funds and a design, and engineering, and a lot of sweat-equity and it could come to be. Hence, **"ample athletic field school."**

Out of the truck, we were met by a small contingent of villagers and school officials; it being a Saturday, no students were present. We were shown the old wooden school building housing 3 classrooms and the more recent

brick addition housing 2 classrooms. Initial interest was in tearing down the entire building and building a new primary school. They also want to expand to a middle school.

In looking over the brick addition, Maung and Steve considered it might be renovate-able to a teachers' office and/or teacher housing or temporary classroom in the transition to middle school the first and/or second year. It would need steel reinforcing around the top plate of the walls with a cement beam or wall across the middle of the large space for structural support for the exterior walls. New roof framing and a new galvanized roof with a ceiling would do a lot for making this space usable. It never was quite clear whether the immediate need was for a primary school of 5 rooms or a middle school of three rooms. But we had a good visit, looked over the athletic field and listened to John's dream vision with Maung suggesting a brick retaining wall between the school buildings and the playing field with steps to create an amphitheater-like sitting space for observers of sporting events.

After a brief recounting of the process we go through and the timing of decisions, we left for Pweyedaung where we were to look over the completed library and teacher office in the two-story section of the building we constructed last year. After a 30 minute drive, we pulled in to Pweyedaung playground and met the headmistress who showed us the library, the teachers' room where we were served tea, fruit, sandwiches, etc., enough so that we wouldn't need to stop for lunch on the way back to Mandalay.

We took the time to look over the drinking water tower/kiosk that Maung had designed and constructed for the school campus. Last year, Steve Swope, a hydrologist in Seattle and a student of Steve's, requested that his company's annual donation go to support a water project in Myanmar. They offered \$4k, which was used to construct this kiosk. It is a beautiful tower with 2,500 liter SS tanks up on top of a cement kiosk. There are drinking/washing spigots on three tiled-sides of the kiosk and there is a multi-stage purification filter system within the lower room of the tower.

The unit is located in the far corner of the playground next to a classroom building we'd built some years ago; it is in plain sight of teachers in their

classroom and students on the playground so that it won't be liable to damage, vandalism or climbing on by students. It is also located lower than the well and cistern in the upper right corner of the lot so the water flows by gravity feed to the SS tanks. A small pump forces the water through the filtration system and out the spigots.

This design for a water/drinking fountain is widely admired by other school officials around the area who have come to take photos for building at their own schools. The military officers' training school nearby has also sent a photographer to take photos for making their own. In looking over the library downstairs in the new building, I saw the many children's books in English that Kamala and I had offered to them, along with many Burmese language books.

We left after a short snack and headed down hill to Maung's to check in on the seamstresses and his family. It was an easy trip and a friendly greeting arriving at Maung's where we met his two sons and 4 of the 5 women sewing uniforms with Maung's wife. One had gone back to care for her father in Hti Hlaing for a few days. We offered cosmetic kits to all the women and as they opened them, identified for them what they were for: shampoo, lotion, eye make-up, perfume, etc. They were all giggles and smiley to receive the gifts. After a short visit, we disassembled the canopy Maung had constructed earlier over the back of the truck to shade us sitting in the back on the trip up and back from Pyin Oo Lwin. It was a pleasant visit, easy trip and welcome to be back in the hotel.

Roger, Steve and John met at the Bistro, a new restaurant in Mandalay opened by the former chef of the Rangoon Strand Hotel. It was a hip-looking, modern, interestingly decorated multi-room restaurant with an original menu and Western prices. We had a discussion about John's expenses, hotel room costs, quarterly stipend we offer him and other items.

It was a relatively quiet evening while Maung was meeting with his head mason and head carpenter at home to come up with an estimate for the cost of building the classroom buildings, teachers' cottages, along with toilets, blackboards and desks of all the sites we had visited. Maung makes all his estimates with the advice of the carpenter and mason chiefs

for accuracy and transparency. Maung is very communicative and transparent with everyone on money in, money out, rationale for use of better materials, and design of buildings, etc. He constantly talks about doing good for the people, developing kusala kamma. It is a distinctive difference between him and many others in Burma, though we seem to meet and work with good people in every location.

We negotiated a ride with someone who had pulled up, seemingly to give us a ride. We never were sure if he was a taxi driver or not and he didn't convince us that he knew where we wanted to go nor did he answer when we inquired as to cost. But in the end, we got to where we wanted to go to drop off John and to get back to our hotel. Another night of fine dining ending with an early drop into bed. One day remaining in Mandalay.

Sunday, Dec 13, 2015

Nwar Chan Gyi Kone in Kyause District, golf, travelogue, dinner at Ko's Kitchen

We were up for an early hotel breakfast, very tasty with eggs cooked to order. (I believe that Steve even had noodles one day.) Yesterday I (Roger) was feeling poorly so skipped the visit to Py Oo Lwin. Slept in the morning and then walked around our hotel and had lunch at a nice Chinese restaurant on the river. While a nice hotel, the area around it is not the best. A lot of families live in dire conditions earning some money off the river. It also happens to be the biggest fish market in Mandalay. That was a sight to see and made it easy for me to order chicken for dinner.

After breakfast, we set off to visit the new Nwar Chan Gyi Kone school. Everyone from the village was out, including children, for a joyous celebration, similar to when we first visited a year ago.

We built a well, teachers' cottage for 5, and a 30' by 90' school building. Everything looked great. They are using the new building for grades 4/5/6. There is an old concrete building for grades 1/2/3 and tear down bamboo buildings for kindergarten and grades 7/8/9. There are 52 children in kindergarten, 141 in primary school, and 77 in middle school. The village built a fence around the school and helped out a lot with construction.

While very grateful, they asked if we would construct another 30' by 90' school and they would rebuild the kindergarten. We agreed to consider a 30' by 60' instead and Maung will meet with educational officials next week to review our reduced proposal.

In 2 hours, we were back in Mandalay by 1pm. John and I then went to play 9 holes of golf while Steve and Maung, who were behind in their work, stayed back to catch up. Also, they don't golf.

A tight match, 8 hole warm up and then a one hole match on number 9. Close but despite a one and a half stroke handicap, John lost by 2 and had to buy the Myanmar beer. Maung came to our hotel before dinner and negotiated schools, uniforms, and desks for 2016 in a very efficient and friendly manner. He also handled all the expenses. The details of what we agreed to will be in our spreadsheet.

We went to Ko's Kitchen for our last Mandalay dinner where the food was not the best but the generosity of Steve plus the Myanmar beer more than compensated for it. Exhausted, sick, back to the hotel and crashed.

Monday, Dec 14, 2015

Flight Mandalay to Yangon. Tired, Sick, Recovery Day.

Tuesday, Dec 15, 2015

Hmawbi Daw Sanda's boat school.

How sad, I am writing this for a second time on the plane to Taipei. The first one somehow got sent without the report, go figure. I was struggling but Steve's health has improved. After breakfast, we went to visit Daw Sanda's monastic school at Hmawbi, about a 2 hour drive from Yangon. Yu Yu Hlaing came with us to act as interpreter along with 2 nuns from the Yangon nunnery. Daw Sanda was already there and visits once a week. There are currently 3 buildings there, all recently built with funds from one donor. He is Burmese but now lives in Singapore and he speaks good English.

The main building is 120' by 30' and is used for classrooms, grades 1 to 6. It has an unusual but effective roof system that we took pictures of. The

remaining 2 buildings are two storey 25' by 35' and are used as a clinic, kitchen, and sleeping quarters for 60 nuns who live there, very crowded. Another 100 local children also go to the school.

There is something very unusual about this school in that it floods several times a year during the rainy season. The water rises by 3 to 4 feet so the buildings are built on 5 foot stilts with an 8 foot foundation. They have 6 boats to get the children to school when necessary. We saw the cutest video of the children splashing and swimming, having great fun.

What do they want? Daw Sanda first asked for a 2 storey 30' by 60' to be used for 3 more classrooms, additional sleeping quarters for the nuns, and a meeting room. We quickly turned the conversation to a 1 storey building. Another could be built at a later date. That was fine with her and she would use the first building for middle school classrooms. She estimates the cost at 300 lakhs and would ask her brother to make a detailed estimate for us. He has built for her and us at Yangon and Pyapon.

We then returned to Yangon and met with U Hla Maung to review the visit. He will likely pay for half of it as he did for the Yangon nunnery. We finished the day with dinner at Green Elephant where we distinguished ourselves by ordering too much food, see Instagram, that wasn't very good. We will get a detailed estimate but a building agreement may be a problem.