

Recycling Glasses

I go to Myanmar three times a year to write my current book: Myanmar Buddhist Pagoda Festivals and *Nat Pwe*. But something was more important this trip: I had 150 pairs of Used-Glasses to give away to poor villagers.

I travel with Win San and Saya Htay who do all the difficult parts of my expeditions: driving, interpreting, photography, logistics and finance. This leaves me just writing, which is just fine by me.

Win San soon became adept at finding out which were the poorest villages, not just at the top of mountains as in Chin State, but also in Magwe Division and in the middle of the Ayeyarwady River not far from Yangon.

The first was a long day: Win San drove for over nine hours. We left Mandalay and the traffic jams and headed west to Sagaing, then to Yesagyio, Myaing and at last to Mindat over the Chin border.

We stayed at the Moe Pi guesthouse and explained our Used-Glasses Project to the owner, Ko Htang. He confirmed there were plenty of poor villagers up here and some had tattooed faces! And would we like to meet one who could play a flute with her nose? Daw Na Bo Ni was 88 and spent most of her time in bed now. However, she rose, dressed and donned her impressively large earplugs. She was happy to play her flute for us, but no thank you, she didn't want any glasses.

The tradition of tattooing girls was intended to make them unattractive so they would not be stolen (kings and other worthies tended to do this in the early days). The pattern of the tattoo was the location of their home, which was another safeguard. Unbelievably, it was the mother who did the tattooing having first tied up her young daughter of 13 or 14. The girls were uniformly (and not surprisingly) ill for about two weeks after the operation. Fortunately, the tradition ceased many years ago. Daw Tan Pan at 54 was of the younger generation who received some Used-Glasses: she was not tattooed. We also gave away Used-Glasses to Daw Lin Ping who is 60 years of

age, and Daw Hong Shen who was not sure of her age, but possibly 80.

In Magwe Division we met Ko Lay (55) a farmer who was also a toddy tapper. He needed *awegy* glasses as he couldn't see clearly where to cut at the top of the palm tree to release the liquid. As his trees were more than 30 feet high I was particularly happy we gave him glasses. Toddy tappers have been known to lose their foothold at times usually with catastrophic results.

We learned of some very poor folk outside Wade Foe village. The people had no land so must live outside the village. They are workers or, as they put it: coolies. They do road making, any kind of repairing. Laundry, sewing: indeed any kind of job that will allow them to eat. U Aung Twe (60) had no farm, so he is a worker. He can read and chose a pair of the *anigy* reading glasses.

Widow Daw Lay Ye (52) lost her husband 15 years ago. He was a toddy tapper, though he actually died of malaria. Her bamboo hut with a palm -thatched roof was set on another person's land. She was thin as a wraith and had no education so could not read. Five months ago she travelled to Mandalay to see the doctor who could not treat her because she had no money.

Word spread around: Daw Win Sein (60) appeared. This lady was albino, so had to be very careful when outside. As soon as she went into the sun, tears streamed down her face. She planned to go to Mandalay and see a doctor, but heard glasses would cost \$70-\$80 a phenomenal and impossible sum for these people who have no money.

We went into the village proper: Wade Phoe, which looked hardly more prosperous than outside. There a very old woman lay in the doorway of her house. Daw Pwan Laing had a stroke nine years ago. She can't walk or sit for long and can't see either. She can't read, so we concentrate on *awegy* distance glasses to improve her terrible quality of life. Now she tells us: she can see I am a foreigner – she couldn't see that before! U Aung Lan (58) tried out the reading glasses with a child's English language textbook! He was a weaver and glasses, he

told us, would help him keep to the pattern. Daw Yan Lwi (70) proclaimed she could see both near and far with one of the pairs of glasses! When we left I noticed she was studying the veins on the back of her hands! Daw Jim (79) settled on *anigy* as she had been to school. She received a sparkly new black pouch. It was not clear whether she liked best the glasses or the pouch!

We arrived at Htay Kon Village. Win San explained, as he did routinely, that we were giving away Used-Glasses first to the old people (who needed them) then to younger folk (if they needed them). Fifteen villagers gathered for the show. Saya Htay sat on the floor with bags of glasses around her and I sat on the floor writing.

Daw Gyi (67) arrives. One of her eyes constantly runs tears and is almost sightless. Fortunately we have glasses that helped her. Elderly Daw Thein Su (75) can read, so she is very happy with *anigy* reading glasses.

Saya Htay notices U Bein (60) has found a pair of glasses that suit him but they have lost their arms! “Don’t worry, I can fix them”, came his comment!

Daw Thein Oun (72) went to see a ‘doctor’ in Pakokku two years ago. The ‘doctor’ sold her a pair of sunglasses despite her saying she could not see any better with them. She was cheated, but could do nothing about it.

I wondered why this village seemed so much poorer than others, bearing in mind they were able to grow sesame, butterbeans, yellow beans and peanuts which is what all other farms round there grow, then I learned the answer. In 2013 toward the end of the dry season when there was no water around 22 houses were lost when a fire raged through the village. Most people lost everything. Many had to go looking for work in Pakokku.

We didn’t only donate in villages. Driving slowly through Chauk, I noticed a man sitting beside the road one of whose eyes was badly shriveled. We stopped and Saya Htay told him of our free Used-Glasses Project. The young man (35) was working his land some years ago and a sliver of bamboo sliced into his eye. The doctor wanted to remove the eye, but he resisted. That eye is of course sightless, but the other one was

hazy too. Ko Naing Oo tried on the glasses and the third pair gave him clearer vision. He told us he never dreamed he would ever have glasses. As we travelled around almost everyone told us the same. Others were so stunned they walked away as if they were in a dream!

Our last village (as it turned out) was a fishing village near Na Pu Taw about an hour from Pathein. Here the Ayeyarwady River is about three miles wide. We'd heard that the village was poor partly because it was remote from the markets of Pathein and partly because it was beneath the water when the Ayeyarwady overflows - and it is starting to do this right now. We arrive at Kuk Sen Shen Wa and sit on the floor of a tiny hut above the water. Saya Htay sets up shop. She hands out one pair of glasses after another trying to remember who has tried which. This is not easy as sometimes a pair or two get handed from one person to another. She is endlessly patient and encouraging and no she doesn't mind a bit if someone insists on trying on at least seven pairs. Win San meanwhile is hearing the history of the many pairs of eyes and translating for me as I sit taking down names and ages of all and sundry.

The first to try some *aweyi* distance glasses is 64 year old Daw Theingyi. Her husband had a stroke years ago and is paralysed. She supports them by cooking and selling fried onions to other villagers. Daw Nu (52) and Daw Saw Yi (60) also chose *aweyi* and Daw Tan Dan Htay (44) who is a tailor chose *anigy*, which will be good for her close work.

U Thein Thein (65) arrives. He like all the men and most of the women is a fisherman. When throwing nets he needs to see exactly where the fish are.

More fishermen walked in. U Sa Tu Ya (39) U Saw Min (45), U The Gyi (57) had one eye sunken and discoloured. About 25 years ago he was ill with a very high fever and a white spot appeared in his eye. He was happy with his glasses.

Other folk who received Used-Glasses were U Yaw Win (61) who was a fisherman as well as Daw San Da Win (41) who grew *padi* as did Daw Yin Yin (48), who was wearing lots of *thanaka* against sunburn.

It seemed that a greater proportion of people in Kuk Sen Shen Wa village had bad eyesight. We wondered why and various theories were propounded. Perhaps poor diet: there were no crops other than rice, or animals other than goats and the latter are used only for milk. Maybe the constant sharp contrast between the colour of the water and the sun hitting the water, perhaps spending much of their time up to their waist in cold water with the sun beating down on their heads. Their sole way of eating and earning is by fishing, so weather plays a part. This village has literally hand to mouth existence. If they catch nothing, they don't eat and of course they don't earn either. The head of the village is U Kin Juyi (55). He saw a doctor five years ago who wanted to operate on his eyes. He could not afford this so has been unable to read since. Now he can. He explained how they lived in fear in the rainy season. They are not far from the area where thousands of people drowned and homes were swept away by Cyclone Nargis. He told us he warns the people through a loudspeaker whenever he hears high winds approaching. But what can we do, he asked, we live on an island in the Ayeyarwady River, we have nowhere else to go. Over three weeks we travelled 900 miles and gave away 141 pairs of reading or long-distance recycled glasses. As we left each village, the smile on the villagers' faces said it all.