

The Crippled Girl

Although Burma herself is viewed and vilified, particularly in the west, as a pariah, the acts of kindness by the people themselves reflects a far deeper kind of cultural compassion. I have been a frequent visitor to the country for over 20 years and have been witness to many of the historical events over that period. One of the Places in Burma which has always been enchanting is the ancient capital of Pagan, located in the hot, dusty plains of central Burma. Pagan flourished from about the 9th century until the troops of Kubla Khan overran the city and its one million inhabitants for not paying tribute to the great Khan. The King fled and the thousands of temples and pagodas were left to stand on their own silently for many centuries.

A few months ago I again visited Pagan and drove around the dirt tracks lined with cactus and thorny scrub brush with my ever loyal horse cart driver Ko Chit Sae whom I have known for years, and who has stayed with me at my former house in Rangoon during the difficult times of martial law and curfew. Lacquer ware in all of its applications has been produced in Pagan for centuries. The extremely dry climate makes for ideal conditions for the drying process, each of which must be undertaken for every layer of lacquer applied. Lacquer can be painted on teak wood for furniture, woven bamboo for utilitarian articles such as monks' begging bowls and even to horse hair that is so delicate one side of a cup can be pressed to nearly touch the opposite side. Maung Maung, who owns a lacquer ware factory in Pagan, has a sincere appreciation for Burmese art and culture, mentioned to me that several stone fragments of the Buddha had just been unearthed near the huge temple called "Sulamani" dating from the late 11th to early 12th century. Ko Chit Sae and I plodded on thru the rutted tracks as he pulled the reins of his sweat-glistened horse to a stop at a lonely enclosure with a long wooden table covered with chicken wire to protect the artifacts within sight of Sulamani. Near this enclosure lived a family, a husband and wife with two daughters whose sole job was to guard those relics. Their house was more of a temporary shelter built of rudimentary bamboo. As I leaned forward to get a better look at a huge fragment of the Buddha's head, classic with the fine lines and curves of the early period, I noticed somebody standing beside me with a radiant smile. It was not until I drew back to look at her that I noticed she used a crutch and was missing the lower part of her leg below her left knee. I asked Ko Chit Sae to ask the family how this had happened, and they said that she had been born that way. By the glow of her smile I could see that she in no way thought of her condition as any particular impediment. Hkay Ti Win is twelve years old and has huge, sparkling eyes.

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Something in her spirit inspired me. So many people with no handicaps defeat themselves in life, while this girl hobbling along with one leg was filled with hope. I took some pictures of her, some with my trusty Canon and others in Polaroid which I gave to her. She was attending school and was obviously quite bright. I kept thinking about her, and in later visits I could see clearly her family's love for her as they dressed her in the best clothes they could afford and her sister tied ribbons in her hair.

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One of my dearest friends in Rangoon, now 83 years old, is Doctor Maung Taik, who was the chief forensic pathologist in Burma and estimates he has conducted over thirty thousand autopsies in various cases, one on his own son who years before had died of a drug overdose. Imagine conducting an autopsy on your own son. He is also a famed golfer who plays several rounds each week, drinks a few glasses of single-malt Scotch every day, and is one of the best cooks I know. He probably speaks English better than I do, and during my visits we will often debate the origins of words, consulting a dog-eared dictionary several inches thick. During times of frequent electrical blackouts in Burma when he would invite me over for dinner, I would bring my 100-year-old gramophone with a hand crank to his place and we would listen to scratchy records of Caruso.

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I mentioned to Doctor Taik that I had met a girl of 12 years near the Sulamani temple and that she had been born missing one leg. He asked me where the leg ended and I told him just below the knee. The joint in the knee functioned perfectly and the tibia and fibula were present ending in a blunt stump. Since Doctor Taik had trained hundreds and perhaps thousands of doctors, he is looked upon with the great respect that only a lifetime of service can merit. He mentioned to me that one of his former students was now the superintendent of the national rehabilitation hospital in Rangoon and that he would be happy to introduce me as they could provide a prosthesis for young Hkay Ti Win. I arranged to have her and her mother come to Rangoon for treatment. The bus ride, which was the first time she had ever left rural Pagan, took 20 hours, and the bus blew five tires on the way.

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Arriving at the hospital, which had open windows and overhead fans which didn't work because of the lack of electricity, was a courtyard with numerous patients awaiting a new limb or learning to use their new prosthesis with able-bodied nurses assisting them in starched white uniforms. Hkay Ti Win, her mother and I were brought into the superintendent's office, where Doctor Taik introduced us and showed the doctor her missing leg. The superintendent, Doctor Min Lwin

Ramu, said that they would be glad to provide lodging for Hkay Ti and her mom, as well as food, the new leg and the rehabilitation process necessary for learning how to walk on two feet. He said that if I did not have the money, it wasn't a problem since they would provide all of this for free. I said that no, I did have enough money and was willing to pay. The entire cost was only a few hundred dollars, which I happily gave the doctor in Kyats, the local currency. As I write this, Hkay Ti Win and her mom are staying at the hospital. Doctor Taik and some of my Rangoon friends visit often bringing cookies and magazines. The cast for a new limb is being transformed into a new leg which she will be taught to use by the staff.

Doctor Taik tells me that when she is fitted and the rehabilitation complete at the end of this month, Hkay Ti Win will be able to run for the first time in her life. I have asked her for only one thing in return, the well-worn and polished wooden crutch that her father built for her.