

Could you Give me a Horse?

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Thursday, 25 December 2008 00:00



Eight-year-old Htet Wai Lin lives in U-yin village, Kyauktan, Myanmar. He's a typical child in every way but one: An early illness left him unable to stand or walk. Such a disability might prevent some children from attending school, but this young man and his parents weren't so easily deterred. Since his legs couldn't carry him, he turned to Tzu Chi volunteers with an unusual request: a horse to do the job.

Htet Wai Lin developed a high fever when he was just three months old. Due to his young age and the severity of the fever, his parents sought help at the hospital. Doctors and nurses attended to the boy for the next seven days, trying everything they could to coax him back to health. Part of his treatment involved daily injections. Although he eventually recovered and returned home, he left the hospital with a tragic reminder of his illness: the total paralysis of his legs. He was unable to even stand up on his own.

His parents were simple farmers. They were unable to afford the long-term medical costs of physical therapy, and in effect he was left untreated. Now eight years old, the best he could do was squat on his heels for short periods of time. As much as he wanted to, he still couldn't stand or walk.

But lack of money didn't mean his parents didn't care. In fact, they provided meticulous care for him. Most importantly, they made sure that he went to school. Htet Wai Lin always did very well in his studies and was among the top students in his class. He was very popular in school.

Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in May 2008, wreaking death and devastation. In the aftermath of the disaster, Tzu Chi volunteers swung into action and held several relief distributions in U-yin village. Htet Wai Lin's mother, Soe Soe Myint, carried him on her back and stood among the crowd on the dock to welcome the volunteers each time they visited the village. The mother and son would also be there with the crowd to see the volunteers off when it was time for them to go.

It wasn't long before the volunteers noticed the pair. When they approached them, they found out that the son had asked his mother to take him to see the Tzu Chi volunteers.

"Could you please give me a horse?" Htet Wai Lin boldly asked the volunteers. "If you do, my mom won't have to carry me all the way to school every day."

This comment prompted the volunteers to find out more about the boy and his family. They discovered that Soe Soe Myint walked 30 minutes every day to take her son to school—while carrying him on her back. Although the trip wasn't too long, the boy was growing up day by day. Eventually, there would come a time when he would be too big for his mother to carry him any more. What would happen then?

After he asked for the horse, Htet Wai Lin made another request to the volunteers: "I beg you to cure my legs. I want to walk again."

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The volunteers' hearts went out to the mother and son. They contacted Dr. Htin Myat in Yangon for help. The doctor, 73, was kind and gentle. He had even once visited Taiwan in 2007 to attend the annual conference of the Tzu Chi International Medical Association. When he learned about Htet Wai Lin's condition, he decided to do his best to help the boy. He asked the Tzu Chi volunteers to take him to the boy.



I want to stand up

On November 7, 2008, after traveling for more than two hours—first by car, then by boat—the volunteers and the doctor reached U-yin village.

Dr. Htin Myat found that Htet Wai Lin's legs responded well to stimulation, and he believed that he should receive treatment as soon as possible. The boy's parents and the volunteers immediately decided to take him to Yangon General Hospital for treatment.

When they arrived, the hospital was full. As a second choice, the boy was taken to Yangon Orthopaedic Hospital. Compounding their earlier misfortune, Dr. Zaw Wai Soe of the hospital's orthopedics department had gone abroad and would not be available that week. To save money, Htet Wai Lin and his mother went to stay at a temple to await the doctor's return. With no other choice, the boy's father, Thet Wai, returned home to work on the farm.

Five days later, Dr. Htin Myat phoned Tzu Chi volunteers and informed them that Dr. Zaw Wai Soe had returned to the country and had agreed to examine the boy. Although it was already late in the day, Dr. Htin Myat accompanied the mother and son and the volunteers to the orthopedic hospital.

After a preliminary examination, Dr. Zaw Wai Soe delivered some bad news. He said that because the boy had passed the best age for treatment—five—he couldn't guarantee that he would be able to walk again. The best he could do was reassure the mother that her son would be able to stand up on his own. He asked to have the boy checked into the hospital the following day for further examination.

The boy's father made a special trip to the hospital the next day to make all the necessary arrangements. The family of three looked worried and anxious as they checked in. They grew even more uneasy when they learned that the hospital allowed only one family member to stay with the patient. Tears filled Soe Soe Myint's eyes as she tried to control her emotions. When Htet Wai Lin learned that his father had to go home again, he started crying too. The Tzu Chi volunteers tried to console and soothe them, and were eventually successful. Finally, mother and son were able to calm down.

The hospital charged minimally for its services, and even waived its fees for poor families. The volunteers gave Soe Soe Myint 10,000 kyat (about US\$8) so that she could buy food for herself and her son for a week.

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When they entered the ward, they were surprised to find only a bare wooden bed. The volunteers purchased a mat, blankets, and pillows so the mother and son wouldn't be cold at night.

Studying hard even in the ward

Healing Htet Wai Lin's condition wasn't easy. After all, he hadn't been able to stand or walk for eight years. To begin, the doctor arranged for the boy to undergo three hours of physical therapy a day. This started two weeks before the corrective surgery was scheduled.

The physical therapy was difficult for Htet Wai Lin. His face was contorted with pain when he was doing the exercises, but everyone could see he was doing his best to endure it. Twelve days into the therapy, he could already sit up steadily on the bed. He could even stand with help from others.

When the boy learned that it was Master Cheng Yen who had sent the volunteers to help him realize his wish to walk, he put his palms together to show his gratitude. He even prostrated himself three times a day—in the morning, at noon, and in the evening—before a picture of the Master. He could be heard murmuring at the photograph, as though he was talking directly to the Master. The volunteers were happy that he had found spiritual support.

The boy's love for learning was truly praiseworthy. Although there was no desk or chair in the ward, he managed to read and write on the bed. He wrote with care, his penmanship neat and beautiful.



Challenges to overcome

Finally, the day of the surgery arrived, November 28, 2008. Wearing a hospital gown, Htet Wai Lin prostrated himself before the Master's photo. Then he was taken into the operating room. Tzu Chi volunteers stayed with his mother outside the operating room.

The operation lasted two hours. When the anesthetic wore off, Htet Wai Lin was in a great deal of pain. And there wasn't only the pain from the surgical wound to endure, which was bad enough. The doctor had affixed several kilograms of stones to his legs to help correct the deformities, and the youngster had to endure pain from that too. One can only imagine how agonizing it all was and how the boy had to muster all his willpower to endure it.

The compassionate Dr. Htin Myat visited Htet Wai Lin from time to time in the days following the surgery. They got along very well—just like a child and his grandfather.

The doctor gave Htet Wai Lin new clothes, and the boy put his palms together to express his gratitude. Volunteers knew that he loved reading, so they brought him some books. Always studious and diligent, the boy immediately started reading.

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On the fifth day after the surgery, he could stand steadily with only a little help from his mother. All the volunteers were filled with great joy to see the boy getting better day by day.

On December 12, Htet Wai Lin underwent another operation. When he was pushed out of the operating room after four hours of surgery, his legs had been set in casts and arranged with wooden sticks in the shape of the letter "A." After the anesthetic subsided, Htet Wai Lin cried for hours. Before, his legs were only able to open a little; now with his legs spread apart like that, he was in tremendous pain. He would have to lie in bed with his legs set like that for at least one and a half months. His parents' hearts ached for him, but there was nothing they could do.

Volunteers visited Htet Wai Lin and his mother twice a week. The boy always looked forward to their visits. One time, as the volunteers prepared to leave, he suddenly said to them, "Don't forget to visit me again!" The volunteers kissed him tenderly and reassured him that they would visit him often.

Three wishes

Because the hospital did not have enough beds, Htet Wai Lin had to give up his bed to another patient and leave the hospital. After he was discharged in late December, he and his mother went to stay with a relative in Yangon.

When the volunteers went to visit them, they found them staying in the kitchen of their relative's house. The place was crude, but at least they were being taken care of.

By this time, Htet Wai Lin's toenails had grown very long. He would not allow his mother to trim them because he was afraid it would hurt. However, when the volunteers asked him to let them do it, he obediently agreed. Sister Qiu Ming-min (邱明敏) carefully cut his toenails. It was this trust in the Tzu Chi volunteers that touched everyone.



When the volunteers asked the boy what he wanted to do first after he could walk, he replied, "I want to visit Master Cheng Yen and thank her."

His father said, "As a farmer, I would never have had enough money to have his condition treated. I'm very grateful for Tzu Chi's help." He added that he hadn't expected that the volunteers would give them so much help.

Htet Wai Lin shared with the volunteers his three wishes: First, he wanted to become a Tzu Chi volunteer and help other people; second, he wanted to become a doctor who didn't charge patients money; third, he wanted to be wise like the Master.

Through his three wishes, the volunteers could see his expectations for his future. They were also glad to see the seeds of charity taking root in him.

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When the volunteers visited the boy on January 7, 2009, they were surprised to see all his hair gone. He looked like a little monk.

Htet Wai Lin had decided to have his head shaved because it had become difficult for him to wash his hair after the surgery and his head itched constantly. For better hygiene, he decided just to get rid of his hair.

On January 12, the casts were taken off the boy's legs. He still had to undergo half a month of physical therapy. Whether he would be able to walk or not depended a lot on the therapy. The volunteers prayed that the boy would recover quickly and that he would soon be able to put on his first pair of shoes and start walking.

Htet Wai Lin's amazing journey isn't over yet—he continues to undergo physical therapy, getting stronger every day. Although nobody knows what his future holds, one thing is certain: The strength of his spirit throughout his journey contributed to the happy outcome he is enjoying today. None of that would have been possible if not for the kind volunteers from Tzu Chi. Instead of just giving him a horse, they gave him a far more useful gift—the use of his legs.

By Chen Ji Ren, Li Cheng-jie, and Liu Ci Jun
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