



CHINESE & ASIAN MEDICINE

Bringing Qi and Light to Burma

In December 2007, I helped bring acupuncture to a refugee camp in Burma (Myanmar). I was given the opportunity to train 15 “backpack medics” simple techniques in auricular acupuncture, while my teammates installed solar power in the clinic (a large bamboo hut with dirt floors). Together, we brought “qi and light” to people in desperate need.

Burma is one of the most violent and oppressed places in the world. Many of you may know of the famous peace activist [Aung San Suu Kyi](#), who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 and has been put under house arrest by the country’s military rulers. The hill tribe we helped, called the Karen, has been at war with the government for more than 50 years. Much of this tension stems from what the Karen perceived as [betrayal at the hands of the British](#) after helping them recapture Burma from the Japanese during WWII. According to the [Human Rights Watch World Report 2002](#): “Villagers [in Burma] continued to be forcibly relocated, and those suspected of aiding guerrillas were tortured and sometimes killed.” Additionally, [Burma is second only to Afghanistan](#) in number of new landmine victims.



The Karen in Burma have suffered oppression at the hands of successive regimes of that country for decades. Forced re-settlement and labor, incarceration, denial of political representation and citizenship status, among other human rights violations have led thousands of Karen to move into Thailand. While many argue that they have a better life there, their status is yet unsure. Many of them are in Thailand as refugees.

We were helped over the Thai border into Burma by some friends on both sides. We finally arrived at a village that had been carved out of the jungle a short time after the Myanmar army had come into the area and wiped out dozens of nearby villages. No one there had escaped the trauma or physical violence that is the result of the ongoing conflicts in Burma. We saw many amputees due to the huge proliferation of landmines in the area. The army had soldiers stationed a few miles away. We found out later on that the only thing keeping them out was the Karen guerilla soldiers at the camp we were working in.

Auricular acupuncture was very helpful, but I quickly realized that the villagers needed much more. *Ashi*-style acupuncture was implemented, along with electric-stim, *gua sha* and massage. We had tremendous results. People were lined up every morning for treatment. Once the word got out in the camp, they trickled in through the day. The most important task I had was training the "backpack medics" to be careful to dispose of the needles properly and never reuse them. They caught on amazingly fast; you have to in a war zone.

One thing that I stressed to the backpack medics was that acupuncture could help in many ways that Western medicine could not. Once they saw that the acupuncture could help them with their own pain or posttraumatic stress disorder, they felt more comfortable with administering it to their fellow villagers. I asked about herbs and they introduced me to an old gentleman who they said

knew all the plants of the jungle. I urged them to sit at his feet and learn what they could, as this was a tradition that would be very useful in their efforts to help each other. These local medics had many other volunteers coming in to work with them. For example, a month before we came to the camp, a surgeon from Johns Hopkins University came to show them how to amputate limbs.

One patient we had was a little old woman, probably about 70 years old, whom we started to call the "little bird." She could not have weighed more than 80 pounds. She was brought to the clinic by her husband, who probably weighed 100 pounds, carried on his back. She had pain just about everywhere so we gave her some gentle treatments. We were later told that she was feeling much better.

The Mae Ta Clinic, near where we were staying in Thailand, continuously treats Burmese refugees and may be open to practitioners coming there to treat patients for pain and other conditions. You can find out more by visiting www.maetaoclinic.org. The clinic offers acupuncture and are often looking for volunteers.

This experience left me humbled and grateful that I could offer immediate results to people in severe physical and emotional duress. Unfortunately, we could not go back there this year because of fighting in the area.

Now, we have a similar unique opportunity to help a large number of impoverished villagers in Eastern Tibet. This is an area that has no medical services, electricity, running water or heat. We will be leaving this July to establish a medical clinic. With a committed team, we will bring much-needed medicine and training to local villagers. We will also bring solar power to the clinic and, with sufficient funds, bring this same solar power to the nearby orphanage. We hope to set up a similar model that we saw work in Burma, but know that the work will be ongoing over the years. The goal is to create a freestanding clinic with permanent doctors and community health workers who can serve the community for years to come. You can find out more about this project at <http://raktrulfoundation.org>.

The Tibetan project will be done in conjunction with the head lama of the Raktrul monastery, [Bardor Tulku Rinpoche](#). As Rinpoche has stated: "This will bring a new life to the villagers of Raktrul. There is no power or medical facilities in the area and this will be like changing night into day for them."

We are very excited about this project and are looking for volunteers and sponsors. If you are interested you can look at the project video on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=s17YSxBCxjc.

We have seen this model of "Qi and Light" work wonders in Burma. We think that this has truly significant potential. It is sustainable, inexpensive, portable and has an immediate impact for people who have no power or health care. We will be looking for volunteers and sponsors in the years to come. Please contact acukirk@juno.com if you would like to help.

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