

*I have been* away from Burma since 2008. Not a lot of people talk about how it feels like to leave home. Especially when you don't really know when you will ever get the chance to return home again.

There's a reason why a certain language is identified as a 'mother tongue.' Often, it is a language we grew up speaking with our mothers. But it is also a language we speak with our friends and family and almost everyone we know back home. That is also why people call a certain place their 'motherland.'

My mother tongue is Burmese. I never used to speak any other language except for Burmese. And my motherland is Burma.

While most children my age in other parts of the world had to wake up early to get ready for school, I didn't have a school to go to. Then one day, the most unexpected thing happened. A friend of my mother informed me about a centre where I could go to attend school for the first time in my life. While it was an exciting opportunity, it also made me very nervous. I had no idea what attending school would be like. I didn't know if I would make new friends. I barely knew any English, and I didn't know if I would be able to communicate with others.

The first day of school was nerve-wrecking. I sat around looking at the faces of strangers who smiled at me. I couldn't understand what they were saying, so I tried reading their minds. Often, their faces gave clues as to what they were trying to say. The only language I understood at that time was the language of kindness. Even though the words sounded foreign to me, people always said them with a smile, and that made me feel better about being there and feeling lost.

It took a while before I started being able to speak English. I started off by learning the basics. "Book." "Friend." "School." "Teacher." Some people grew up speaking English, but I didn't. So I had to start from scratch. I had to learn how to pronounce words. I had to learn how to use them properly. And slowly, I began to form sentences. I could now tell my stories. I could look at people and ask them, "How are you?" And I could understand when they told me, "Fine, thank you." This language that was so foreign to me began to make sense.

One of the things I have always enjoyed doing is singing. Whenever I felt sad or if I missed home, I would sing. My teachers noticed this, and one day, my teacher, Chris, asked me if I would like to perform on



graduation day. However, I was full of self-doubt. "What would people think of my voice?" "What if I forget the words?" I only knew songs from back home, songs I had grown up with. I asked my teachers all these questions. They gave me kind words of encouragement, but in the end, I knew that I had to do

it for myself. So for the first time in my life, I sang to an audience. I sang to people with whom I started the journey as strangers, who have since become friends. Having these familiar faces in the crowd helped.

It was refreshing to have such kind-hearted teachers in my school. They taught me how to speak in English. They taught me how to sing in public. But most importantly, they gave me a lesson for life - they taught me how to be more confident and to believe in myself.

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