When Dharma Master Cheng Yen founded Tzu Chi in 1966, she fashioned coin banks from bamboo and asked her lay followers—thirty housewives—to save NT$0.50 (about US$0.02) from their grocery money every day to help the poor.

One follower asked, “Can’t I just donate NT$15 each month?” But Master refused. She explained that though the amount was the same, it was important to give rise to a kind thought each and every day.

From these humble beginnings fifty years ago, Tzu Chi has grown into a global NGO with ten million volunteers and donors in over fifty countries, because it collects not only donations, but also kind hearts.
### Words from Master

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Throughout my life, I have always had three daily prayers. First, I pray not for a healthy body, but for a clear mind. Clarity of mind is more important than a healthy body. As the years pass, our bodies undergo aging and finally death, but our wisdom-life is everlasting. If we do not quickly develop our wisdom-life and strengthen our aspirations, then our wisdom will not grow. Thus, I do not ask for good health, but for a mind of clarity and wisdom, without discursive thoughts. This is my first prayer.

Second, I pray not for everything to go my way, but for perseverance and courage. In life, nine things out of ten do not happen according to our wishes, so why do we try to force things to go our way? As ordinary beings, it is our expectations and desires that cause us suffering and afflictions. So, I do not ask for everything to go my way, but for perseverance and courage. When things do not go as we wish, we must persevere; this is a skill we must master. We must also keep up our courage. We should not easily become disappointed or discouraged when we do not get what we want. If we constantly let ourselves be defeated, won't we remain powerless our whole lives? Therefore, we should not ask for everything to go according to our wishes. Instead, we should always reflect on ourselves to see if we have perseverance and courage.

It is precious to be born as a human being. The Buddha tells us that over millions of kalpas, it is difficult to attain human form even once. We may wonder whether, in the past, we were born in the three evil realms. Have we been born in the animal realm, suffering from ignorance and being killed by humans? Or have we been tormented in the realm of hungry ghosts? The Buddha-Dharma tells us that these three evil realms are filled with unbearable suffering. This is truly frightening! Therefore, we must work hard to cultivate ourselves.

Being born as humans, we have the opportunity to witness all kinds of wholesome and unwholesome lives. When we see someone doing good, we have to ask ourselves, do we rejoice at this? When we see other people do good deeds, we are filled with respect and joy. However, we should not only rejoice in their good deeds, but should also get involved ourselves. If we are able to do this, we will feel very fortunate to have been born human. When we see other people do good deeds, we joyfully praise them and gladly join them in the work to help suffering sentient beings. When we help those who suffer fulfill their needs, we realize that we have more than enough. Since we have more than we need, we have the power to help others meet their needs and overcome their obstacles. Then the happiness we feel is due not only to taking joy in others people’s merits, but to being filled with Dharma-joy ourselves. This is something that is possible only in the human realm.

Since we have been born as humans, how can we not make good use of our life? We need to seize our time in this life and take good care of our thoughts. I often say, “Seize the moment and sustain your aspirations forever.” At every moment, we have to be mindful of our thoughts;
when a good thought arises, no matter how brief it is, we must take hold of it and sustain it forever. Recently, I have been encouraging everyone to uphold the Four Practices: extended practice, uninterrupted practice, practice with nothing further, and practice with reverence. This means we need to endlessly sustain and uphold our initial aspiration. Moment by moment, time passes us by and thoughts keep arising. Therefore, we must have perseverance; we must always sustain our good and virtuous thoughts and put our love into action by helping others. This is spiritual cultivation.

Furthermore, we must not be afraid of taking responsibility. We are all fortunate enough to have been born into this world, so aren’t the matters of this world everyone’s responsibility? How much more so for us spiritual practitioners! We who are learning the Buddha’s spirit must learn the persistence of the Buddha, who keeps coming back for the single great cause of helping sentient beings in this world. One person’s strength alone is not enough for this, which is why the Buddha wants to teach many people. When every person makes the aspiration to be a Bodhisattva, everyone must put the teachings into practice. Then, this collective strength will be tremendous.

Therefore, my third prayer is not for lighter responsibilities, but for greater strength. I hope that we can purify people’s hearts and inspire people’s love. The world is vast and there are countless sentient beings. If everyone can join together in the same aspiration, our love can reach every corner of the world. Then, there is no limit to the good that can be accomplished.

The Jing Si Dharma Lineage is a path of diligent practice.
We carry on the Dharma’s essence and make great vows.
The Tzu Chi School of Buddhism is a path through the world.
With compassion and wisdom, we exercise the Four Infinite Minds.
With sincerity, we vow to deliver all sentient beings.
With integrity, we vow to eliminate all afflictions.
With faith, we vow to learn all teachings.
With steadfastness, we vow to attain Buddhahood.

Great loving-kindness without regrets brings infinite love.
Great compassion without resentment brings infinite vows.
Great joy without worries brings infinite happiness.
Great equanimity without expectations brings infinite grace.

We work together while remaining clear and pure like a crystal sphere.
This forest of Bodhi trees flourishes from the same root.
We are all united in cultivating fields of blessings.
We deeply plant the roots of wisdom on the Bodhisattva-path.

Fifty years have passed since Tzu Chi was founded. Today is the first day of Tzu Chi’s fifty-first year. I hope we can all practice diligently along the path of the Jing Si Dharma Lineage and the road of the Tzu Chi School of Buddhism. If we can do this, we will cultivate the good karma that accumulates to perfect our virtue.
As we close the book on 2016, the fiftieth anniversary of Tzu Chi’s founding, let us take a look back at the first fifty issues of Tzu Chi USA Journal through a selection of moving stories that exemplify the spirit of Tzu Chi’s Four Missions and Eight Footprints: Charity, Medicine, Education, Humanistic Culture, Disaster Relief, Bone Marrow Donation, Environmental Protection, and Community Volunteerism.
"Tzu Chi! Tzu Chi!” A young child runs after volunteer Jenny Yao on the playground of John Muir Elementary School in the Western Addition neighborhood of San Francisco, California. As Jenny turns around, the child looks at her and says, “Oh, you’re the other Tzu Chi.”

In San Francisco, the children of the Happy Campus Program have been taught to call all Tzu Chi volunteers by this name. “I want them to identify us by our uniform, not by the individual,” says Roxanne Buchwitz, Tzu Chi’s Charity Lead in San Francisco and Happy Campus Program (HCP) Coordinator for the whole country. In these children’s unstable lives, Roxanne wants there to be something they can count on: the presence of Tzu Chi.

A Program of Love and Care

Officially launched in 2009, HCP now operates in twenty-two schools across eight cities and five states. Unlike other charity organizations that target very specific areas for their support, Tzu Chi’s HCP takes a holistic approach, helping students and their families in a variety of ways—tutoring, uniform distributions, hot meals, even job training for parents—and tailoring the program to meet each school’s specific needs.

Taking to heart Master Cheng Yen’s urging to bridge gaps and conserve resources, HCP refrains from providing aid already offered by other charity organizations, choosing instead to complement their work. “The first thing we ask is what resources they already have, so we can give them something else,” Roxanne explains.

At first, Tzu Chi volunteers encountered resistance from teachers and principals doubtful of what they could bring. Roxanne recalls especially strong resistance from an elementary school in East Palo Alto. Though located in a poor city with high crime rates, the school was accustomed to calling on the Silicon Valley tech giants of neighboring Palo Alto whenever they needed support.

“We don’t need anything from you,” the principal told Roxanne.

“Do those companies give you love and care?” Roxanne persisted, “We have many programs. We can also teach the kids Chinese.”

Sensing there might be something different with this unfamiliar charity organization, the principal agreed to give Tzu Chi a chance.

Long before their efforts were incorporated into a nationwide Happy Campus Program in 2009, San Francisco Tzu Chi volunteers had already been providing afterschool tutoring, giving weekend backpacks loaded with food for kids who would otherwise go hungry, and distributing thousands of pounds of food to families each Friday at John Muir Elementary School and each Monday at Gordon J. Lau Elementary School.

As time went on, volunteers continued all that they had been doing and added more projects. As volunteers became more deeply involved, they found other ways they could add value to the schools. They continue to adapt as needs are identified.

Today, success stories can be seen across
the Bay Area. Thurgood Marshall Academic High School previously had only one student with perfect attendance but now boasts eighty-five. Charles Drew Elementary School, once widely known for poor academic achievement, has been recognized as the most improved public school in the district. The local YMCA invites Tzu Chi volunteers to teach Chinese language during afterschool tutoring sessions and to lead all academic classes during their annual six-week summer camp. San Francisco Food Bank has asked Tzu Chi to continually distribute food to 350 low-income families with a yearly fund of $20,000. San Francisco’s Department of Education, which typically only recognizes the outstanding contributions of individuals, has even given special recognition to Tzu Chi as an organization. How did Tzu Chi volunteers accomplish so much so quickly?

Getting Them There

Early on, volunteers sat down with school administrators and learned that to truly make a difference, they needed to strike at the core of the schools’ problems by making an impact on academic success.

To help the children in their studies, the volunteers needed to interact with them at school. But truancy was a major problem. Not only were children suffering by missing their classes, the entire school was affected, as government funding was determined by daily attendance numbers. So, the volunteers had to start by finding a way to get the children to school each day.

First, they looked to the parents. In addition to giving them food, and later job training sessions, volunteers even helped find furniture and appliances for families who were living in government housing. Sometimes, volunteers
called people selling items on Craigslist to assist them: “This is for a low-income family; would you be willing to donate your washer?” Oftentimes, people agreed to donate the items they were hoping to sell.

Part of the goal of this assistance was to eliminate any excuses the parents had for not sending their children to school. But the volunteers were also conscious that handouts are not a long-term solution. Seeing the wisdom in the old saying “Give a man a fish, feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime,” HCP volunteers implemented the Parent Job Center in 2011. Here, volunteers offer job training to the parents, teach them how to use a computer, sign them up for email addresses, and help them look for jobs online.

As for the children, volunteers designed a smoothie incentive program. Each month, volunteers cut up 150 pounds of fresh fruit to make smoothies for students in five schools who have maintained perfect attendance throughout the month. Those who were tardy or absent can only watch their classmates enjoy their treats.

“Why do you come to school?” volunteers asked some children after a couple months. “Smoothies!”

“No, you come to learn!” At least the first step was accomplished: more of the children were at school. The rest could still be worked out.

A Way to Live

Roxanne is often asked, “Why are you so passionate about Happy Campus?”

“Because of the kids!” Roxanne replies. “Each day I go to the schools, I have to fulfill their wishes. Whatever we promise, we have to deliver. We enrich their lives and bring them hope; we cannot fail them.”

Roxanne was once head of the IT department at a major company. She had stock options, two secretaries, a housekeeper, and authority over 120 employees in seven countries. But she gave it up to become a full-time volunteer. “I don’t need to do this. I don’t even need to go shopping for myself.” But she does. Now she spends her days visiting several schools, shopping at the Food Bank, and buying clothing for students.

Children need to have an identity to hold onto, Roxanne explains. HCP volunteers want to imprint in the children’s minds the idea of Tzu Chi as the reliable caregiver. “The kids become very attached to you,” says Roxanne, “Mom may be remarried, Dad may be in jail. They get worried when you don’t show up, because they fear you may never come again. When young college volunteers come to help with tutoring, the kids love to hold their hands; they long for that intimate touch, for a normal human relationship.”

“I need to find them a way to live,” Roxanne says, knowing that without care and guidance these children may grow up to be problems for society, rather than contributing members.

Roxanne recalls when Tzu Chi first began...
distributing school uniforms at the request of the Department of Education. The first time the owner of a local school uniform store went to measure the students for their clothes, she witnessed abusive and violent children fighting and even throwing chairs. She remarked, “Wow, it’s life-threatening to come here!”

When asked what they want to be when they grow up, one child replied, “I want to be a robber!” HCP volunteers were shocked, but they realized that many of the children know only that kind of life. Living in this world, they have a deprived experience. They only know ten percent of life and never get to see the rest. But in HCP, Tzu Chi volunteers can provide them with love and care, and a window to the world beyond. By learning Chinese language and hearing traditional Chinese stories, the children catch a glimpse of another culture and an understanding that they should respect people and cultures that are different than their own.

**Tzu Chi’s Teaching Methods**

Tzu Chi volunteers have provided weekly vegetarian appreciation lunches to teachers for the past three years. Moved by Tzu Chi’s humanitarian endeavors and philosophy learned during these lunches, teachers started to invite Tzu Chi volunteers to speak to their classes and school-wide assemblies.

At the weekly appreciation luncheons, volunteers no longer serve the teachers; they taught the students to do it. Watching students in child-sized Tzu Chi aprons walk around to each table to ask, “Do you need more tea?” or “Would you like more sugar for your coffee?” the teachers were moved to tears. “I’ve never seen my kids behave this well!” one exclaimed.
When the children do misbehave, many adults feel they have to raise their voices. But Tzu Chi volunteers have demonstrated that there is no need to do so. “I’m just here to tell you what you have to do; I don’t have to yell or shout,” the volunteers tell the students. Once the students understand that there is a certain way to behave, they can begin to accept the idea of following rules. Then, they can begin to learn.

After school, volunteers tutor math in the computer lab. Students log in and go through tailored lessons at their own pace. If strong in addition, they are taught subtraction; if doing well in multiplication, they are drilled in division.

Frequently, frustrations arise. Some children hit all the keys and complain, “This computer is so dumb; it keeps asking me the same question!”

“No, the computer doesn’t know you are smart, because you keep giving it the wrong answers!”

The volunteers tell the students, “You’re smarter than the computer, right? So don’t keep pressing all the keys! Think. What is the computer asking you?” By doing this, volunteers foster critical reasoning skills and perseverance.

Volunteers also work with teachers and school administrators to assess results from standardized math tests. Then they create individualized lesson plans within the computer system that will focus on areas in which the students need the most help.

In addition to math, Tzu Chi volunteers also designed simple Chinese lessons that are fun to sing or chant. With these, the children learn Chinese by repetition, the most natural way to learn another language. “Mother is mama: mama, mama, mama. Father is baba: baba, baba, baba. Monday, Monday: xing qi yi…”

At the school’s annual talent show in 2012, a group of students recited an American poem and then started chanting, “Mother is mama: mama, mama, mama….” They won first prize. Some parents in attendance cried, “I never imagined my son would be able to speak Chinese!”

A New "Tzu Chi"

Most of the students at HCP schools do not have easy lives. Many of them have parents serving terms in jail. Whenever the parent is transferred to another jail, the child has to move too. Others are in temporary shelters which are only available for three months at a time. So feelings of anxiety are strong in many of the children.

Tim is one such child. A very well-behaved boy, Tim diligently

In the afternoons, volunteers guide Malcolm X Elementary students through math problems.
Photo: Lulu Yin
dropped a penny into his bamboo bank every day, just as the Tzu Chi volunteers asked him. Some of the pennies he found on the street, others were given to him by his parents. One cold and rainy day, the volunteers did not see Tim at school. But he appeared at the bus stop in the afternoon. He got off the bus and ran toward the volunteers, but he tripped and fell. The bamboo bank he was carrying was knocked out of his hands and pennies rolled everywhere.

“I just wanted to bring this back to you, because I'm going to another school now,” Tim told them. His mother was being transferred to a different jail, so Tim was in the process of switching foster homes. “I need to return this to you.” Tim held out the half-empty bamboo bank. The volunteers could not help but cry as they helped him pick up pennies from the ground.

“I don't know what to do,” Tim said, lowering his head.

“You can still put a penny in the bamboo bank each day,” Roxanne told him, “You have just been promoted. You have to be the Tzu Chi at your new school now.”

“Huh?”

“You have to tell the other kids in your new school to do good deeds, think good thoughts, and say good things. You are Tzu Chi now.”

“Oh, okay.” A glint of joy flickered in Tim's eyes.

“I'll go visit you,” Roxanne promised him, “I know your principal.”

Gratitude, Respect, and Love

Gratitude, respect, and love cannot fill stomachs or produce good grades. However, under the influence of Tzu Chi’s gratitude, respect, and love, children are transformed. Many of the children now behave well, come to school consistently, and are willing to learn. Most importantly, they have bigger hearts: they realize that there are other people in the world besides them.

Ever since bamboo banks were introduced to the schools in 2006, children have been saving money one penny at a time. When disaster strikes in the world, they generously donate money from their bamboo banks and from selling recyclables. When Haiti was struck by a major earthquake in 2010, many students even went out on the streets to dance, perform, and sell salads and cookies to collect more money.

For these deprived children to work so hard to collect donations and give so happily to others, it is obvious that the love, care, and respect they have received has taught them gratitude and selfless compassion. Clearly, the Happy Campus Program is leading them onto the right path towards a happy life.

“Tzu Chi! Tzu Chi!” A child runs up to Roxanne and eagerly reports, “Another Tzu Chi came to the school today. She’s old; I helped her carry her bag.”

“Wonderful! Do you feel proud that you helped people?”

“Yes!” Having received his praise, he hops away with a big grin.

“I want them to identify our uniform so when they move away, the feeling of attachment is not disrupted. They don't have to remember that at this school, it’s Roxanne; at that school, it’s Jenny,” Roxanne smiles broadly, “And I’m proud to be called Tzu Chi.”

Editor’s Note: The children's names have been changed to protect their identities.
The Hands that Hold

Emily Chen

By offering their hands, Tzu Chi volunteers cause eyes to meet and hearts to touch. Photo: Peter Lin
During our time in South Africa, I found that I was confronted again and again with a feeling of helplessness. In the townships of Johannesburg, we saw shacks the size of my office desk that entire families called home. In Durban, we met people who had not been in the sun for two years because they lack the strength to move from their beds, people who had been sleeping in their own urine and feces because their families cannot or will not take care of them, and stroke victims who could only “sleep it off.” We saw little girls shivering in the cold winter air with bare feet and summer dresses. We learned that medical treatment remains scarce, and the ability to follow up on medical tips almost nonexistent. We were told that some sick people will not take pills because they cannot afford the food to take them with.

As a volunteer, I felt like a drop in the desert. In such circumstances, what can we give in a way that is both meaningful and lasting?

The answer, I feel, is among the experiences we gained in South Africa. I found it in the physical therapy advice a Tzu Ching was giving to a stroke sufferer while showing him exercises to lift and strengthen his leg. The advice itself was simple: sit straight and, with someone’s hands at your knees and calves, lift your leg. But the man’s wife, who was supporting his legs, misunderstood the purpose and kept lifting his leg for him. She meant to ease his burden, but if she lifts his leg for him, he will never strengthen his own muscles. Without strength in his muscles, he will not be able to walk. Her hands were meant to be support, to make sure that he did not fall backwards in his small and steady efforts forward, and to provide encouragement to keep up the exercises. But the wife’s natural instinct was always to lift instead of support.

She meant to ease his burden, but if she lifts his leg for him, he will never strengthen his own muscles. Without strength in his muscles, he will not be able to walk. Her hands were meant to be support, to make sure that he did not fall backwards in his small and steady efforts forward, and to provide encouragement to keep up the exercises. But the wife’s natural instinct was always to lift instead of support.

In some ways, I was similar. I had heard Tzu Chi volunteers speak of “spreading love,” but I never really understood. I made the mistake of thinking that Tzu Chi’s “hands” were meant to lift the leg, but instead they are meant to spread love, respect, and kindness. The hands are only an excuse for eyes to meet and hearts to touch.

Michael Pan, a senior volunteer in South Africa, understands this distinction well. When several Tzu Chings were frustrated that there was not enough time for hands-on interaction with the sick care recipients, he advised them that not everything is hands-on. He told them that the help and the medicine we give are almost secondary: the most powerful impact we can make is in meeting a person’s eyes to see into their heart, clearly, calmly, and with love. We saw that impact in the actions of one care recipient touched by the volunteers of Durban. When he healed from his sickness, he began to devote his time to the same work of spreading love and respect to his neighbors.

In the end, the things we give are only temporary solutions: food is eaten, pencils wear down, clothes become tattered, and even shelters do not stand forever. But in giving, we make a connection and show that we care. Everyone’s path is their own, and they must take their own steps on it and find their own balance to be independent and to be healthy. What we can do as volunteers is to empower them to stand up on their own, to walk beside them instead of constantly bracing them, and to catch them if they fall.

Understanding the meaning of “spreading love,” I now begin to see hope instead of helplessness. I see the Durban volunteers going into their communities and affecting changes.
in thinking. Local volunteers Tolakele and Mini walked into danger, into the gunfights and tension of a cross-town feud, and stopped the fighting by talking and reasoning with both sides. Another volunteer, Brenda, helped the men of her village recognize that a mentally disabled girl is also a person. The men had been raping this girl for years, but now they have come to understand the wrong they were doing. They have not only stopped, but also apologized. Brenda took the girl under her roof, and these men now offer her food and clothing to atone for their past actions.

Over the years, Tzu Chi South Africa has grown to include more than five thousand local volunteers. As they reach out into their communities, their effect is growing. They are spreading love, empowerment, and hope: family helps family and neighbors help neighbors. Before, I had only understood “spreading love” on the small scale. Now I see that it means bringing long-term change so that eventually no more charity will need to be given from an outside source, because neighbors give each other support, because there are doctors in the community, because the community itself is educated, wealthy, and thriving. The hands support the legs until the leg muscles are strengthened; then the legs walk on their own and the hands are no longer needed.

I feel that we still need to strive for the same in the US, because there are still places where entire families fall through the cracks, where people are put at risk because they cannot afford healthcare, and where education slips through children’s fingers because of language barriers or because the love of learning has never taken root.

There is still work to be done then, even here. No matter how blessed we are, sometimes we still need those hands to support us, and we all have hands to offer.

US and South African volunteers together embrace The Power of 5! Photo: Peter Lin
I’m working the night shift as a volunteer in the Lotus Ward, the palliative care unit, of the Hualien Tzu Chi General Hospital. I’m giving Uncle Jian-Jin a massage to ease the pain in his shoulders and neck. The right side of his brain has under-gone surgery a few times. A lump the size of a half dollar protrudes from his head. His brain cancer is in the terminal stage. Because of the tumor, he always feels cold inside. Twenty-four hours a day portable heater warms his body. Even the slightly cool touch of another’s hand is almost too much for him to bear. Intolerable suffering. I thought as I massaged his back. What is it like for him, where he will feel cold until the end of his life?

The left side of his body has languished terribly. He has no control in his left arm and must use his right arm to move the left arm anywhere. Bed-ridden, he moves with great difficulty and depends on others to help him get comfortable in bed. I smell an odor I have smelled once before, among the patients in an AIDS community in Thailand. Perhaps it is the smell of the dying.

In November 2001, I was doing Tzu Chi volunteer work in Thailand in a hospice-care community for individuals with AIDS and HIV in Lopburi, Thailand. From my brief visit, the Lopburi community seemed like a home for social outcasts, a place where no one was wanted. I remember traveling from Bangkok to Lopburi, bumping along down the dirt roads, finally seeing the spare huts and the empty grass fields surrounding the community.

“Every day, at least three people die there. Sometimes, you have as many as six or seven,” my friend Kate informed me. “And the coffins stack up high in the wards.” We saw near-naked corpses left out as an “exhibition” to educate visitors. We saw long piles of unwanted ashes of unwanted people. We saw scores of bed-ridden patients, with faces twisted in pain and suffering. In their eyes, I saw no glimmer of hope, but only empty, lonely sadness.

There were so many patients, but I did not see any medical personnel. Of the hundreds of people living in this community, there were probably a total of ten volunteers from places like Holland, Japan, and America. Most patients do not have family here; most were probably rejected from both their families and society. These patients know that AIDS is still an incurable disease and are in the hospice waiting to die, in pain and alone. What help can they possibly have? I wondered.

Compassion is pure love. To have” great mercy even to strangers” is undefiled love. Though I have no relationship with a person, I can still care for him with a love that gives him happiness and brings me no worries. This is the greatest, purest love.

- Master Cheng Yen -
In the afternoon, Kate and I ventured into the wards to begin our volunteer work: massaging the patients. Kate asked if I was ready to begin. I confidently said that I was. It’s funny how the mind works. Rationally, I thought that it should be no problem approaching these patients. But when the time came to begin massaging my first patient, I noticed how my hands and my heart fluttered and hesitated. I suddenly felt afraid-awkward-but I forced myself to begin.

As I massaged my patient, a broken sound of breathing seized my attention. On the neighboring bed, wearing only a shirt and diaper, was a terribly stick-thin woman in her thirties. I still hear the sound of her breathing—the sound of gasping for air. The struggle to breathe in and out. I wanted to stop massaging my patient and attend to this auntie, but I hesitated: first, finish your job well. Kate went over to the auntie, who murmured that she was in great pain, so Kate notified the medical personnel. Kate would be the last person that the auntie would speak to.

Not long later, the sound stopped. The breathing stopped. I glanced over again. The auntie had died. The Buddha once said, “Life lies in the space of a breath.” He also said, “Life is impermanent.” I couldn’t have known. Now, she was gone. Her body was here, but no one was inside.

Soon after, a trained caretaker came with another AIDS patient, together carrying a large wooden coffin into the ward. They placed the wooden coffin in the ward. The two workers quickly took the clothes off the dead woman. The caretaker held a horrifically large pair of 16” tweezers and began using it to stuff cotton up the orifices of the woman’s body. “It’s to prevent further contagion.” Kate explained. I flinched to see the motion of the stuffing and momentarily forgot to breathe. I stared at this young caretaker’s hands as she did the stuffing, swiftly and boldly deeply. It was like stuffing an animal.

“Do you want to try it?” Kate asked me, referring to the stuffing. “Maybe next time,” I said, she gave me a warm and understanding smile.

After the stuffing was finished, they proceeded to put on a clean set of clothes. Somehow, I felt that there was something not quite right, but what? At that time, I kept thinking to myself, “She was just alive. She just said a few words—that she was in pain. Then she died. She was alive. Moments ago, but now she is dead. She is dead now. What can I do? What should we do? What hope do they have?”

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In performing any medical action, we must always carry the principle of reverence for life.

-Master Cheng Yen-

Tzu Chi volunteers around the world care for the elderly and infirmed.
died in great pain, but also was left alone with not a soul by her side. Even after she dies, she was treated with little respect. She passed, without any feeling of love and respect.

For a few minutes while I thought of this woman, I had returned to Thailand and Lopburi. I caught my wandering mind and refocused my attention to Uncle Jian-Jin. “Is this okay?” I softly said, referring to my massaging. He nodded and used his right hand to express “thank you” in Chinese sign language. He smiled and told me, “Stop if you get tired,” and I nodded joyfully.

In only a few minutes’ time, I have travelled two totally different worlds. I looked around Hualien’s Lotus Ward. Blankets, A light heater, curtains, and electric bed, the call button for the immediate attention of a nurse. There is also a special bath and shower room for bed-ridden patients, a massage room for family, a kitchen, a living room, entertainment facilities, etc., all available in this warm, loving hospice. The Lotus Ward’s mission is to provide the best care and comfort to patients. Every day, kind-hearted nurses make rounds at regular intervals and caring doctors come to see him. I check the visitor’s bed next to him; there slept his affable, gray-haired mother, who always slept with him every day.

His children, other relatives, and friends visit him regularly too.

Uncle Jian-Jin in Taiwan and the auntie in Thailand have much in common. They were both young when diagnosed with incurable, painful diseases. Most importantly, they are both human beings. And like everyone else, they hope for the care and love of others.

Yet from their eyes, I still see the difference. In the eyes of the auntie in Thailand, I saw loneliness, sadness, fear, and dejection. Like the three to seven people in Thailand who die of AIDS every day, the auntie was another nameless face among a sea of victims. They are not victims because of their disease, for this world is full of suffering. Rather, they are but victims of cold and uncaring circumstances beyond their control.

In the wide, astute eyes of Uncle Jian-Jin, there is hope and kindness. When he dies, he will know that the people around him love him, care for him, and respect him. He will leave this world assured of his dignity and be affirmed as person who is worthy of love. He can leave at peace with this world. He has hope because there are the everyday heroes, the thousands of Tzu Chi volunteers, who bring the brilliance of love and the warmth of hope to the cold, dark, desperate corners of world.

Victoria Fan is a Tzu Chi volunteer from Hawaii. She was currently working as a volunteer in the Lotus Ward in Taiwan’s Hualien Tzu Chi General Hospital. The Lotus Ward is the palliative care unit of the hospital offering hospice care.
As he sat waiting in the Buddhist Tzu Chi Free Clinic, Paul Sanguesa was in the midst of a major transformation. After three decades as a thief, drug addict, and malcontent, he was now clean, sober, and employed. But he was still damaged. His teeth were in poor shape and he suffered from a void in his heart: the void that had led him to drugs, alcohol, and jail in the first place. Paul was struggling to leave his past behind, but his physical wounds were not easy to repair, the emotional ones even less so.

Paul’s mental suffering started early in childhood. He recalled, “My life as a child was for the most part a feeling of loneliness and lack of love.” Spurred by those feelings, he acted out to gain validation from the wrong crowd. In response to his poor behavior, his father beat him. Paul fell into a negative spiral, fearing more beatings as he acted out to gain more attention.

Paul’s behavior was motivated by his internal wounds. “I always portrayed the tough and ‘don’t care’ type of attitude around others, but I was really afraid of not being liked or accepted by others.” Those feelings soon fueled a deeper fall. “I ran away from home when I was twelve, quit school at thirteen and started my life of crime, alcohol, and drugs.”

Like many other unfortunate children, Paul eventually entered the revolving door of the prison system. “I started with juvenile hall,” Paul said, “then the county jail at eighteen years old, and then the state prison.” This cycle continued for decades. His family, his mother and his children, could only watch as Paul continued to spiral downward.

At forty-two, Paul found God and began to change his behavior. Paul said, “I was facing a
long prison term, and I met this guy who told me that God told him to tell me to test Him. I was in the county jail waiting for court, and I prayed to God, who didn’t even know me at the time, asking Him to get me out of the mess I created. If He did, I would seek Him out three days later.

"God answered my prayers. I was let out of jail, but I forgot all about what I had promised God in return for getting me out of jail, so thirty-five days later I was back in custody with a new set of criminal charges filed against me." After this relapse, Paul finally gave up his old ways for good.

Though determined, Paul was still at the beginning of a long journey. As an ex-convict, he had difficulty finding a job, so he stayed at the Salvation Army Adult Rehabilitation Center for six months to receive training and guidance. “I learned more about God. I graduated from the rehabilitation program and went to school to become a drug and alcohol counselor.”

At this point in his journey, Paul found himself waiting at the Buddhist Tzu Chi Free Clinic in Alhambra, California, looking for care. "The drugs had taken a toll on my teeth and health. My graduation was coming up, and my teeth were cracked, so I sought dental care through the State Department of Rehabilitation. But I was rejected there and other places as well. My kids were going to be there for my graduation, and I lost all of my self-esteem and hope. I prayed and prayed to God for help to get my teeth fixed, and I ended up at the Buddhist clinic in Alhambra." Paul wanted desperately to show his family that he was a changed man, whole and clean. But his ragged teeth served as a graphic reminder of the life he once lived.

Tzu Chi dentist Dr. Shirley Chen interviewed Paul about his dental problems. "She asked me some questions, and told me she was going to fix my teeth before my graduation, exactly what I had been praying to God for months to no avail. I know it was an act of God working through Shirley and all the loving people at the clinic.”

In addition to help for his teeth, Paul found something deeper at the clinic. "Tears were welling up in my eyes as I talked to these ladies, because they actually listened. I felt a genuine loving affection that I had never experienced before, not even with my own family. Shirley hugged me and I felt loved, like it was from God.”

The visit to the Tzu Chi clinic was a pivotal moment for Paul, for his physical wounds as well as his emotional ones. Connecting with Shirley and the other volunteers, Paul found something other than alcohol and drugs to fill the gaping void in his heart, and he uncovered a determination to give back. “Shirley just had this peace and calm like she was really concerned: genuine concern. I didn’t really understand what
gratitude meant till that happened. Now I really understand, because I experienced it. Whatever I can do to help, to help pay back and show you that I appreciate it, that I’m grateful, I will do.”

True to his word, Paul became a Tzu Chi volunteer. A few short days after the Haiti earthquake in 2010, he gathered with other volunteers to pack relief supplies to send to Haiti. As he joined together with the others to kneel on the floor and pray after assembling the packages, Paul felt right at home. “Tzu Chi volunteers have shown such love to me, I want to pass on that love by helping others. This event is one way that I can repay Tzu Chi.”

Outside of Tzu Chi, Paul also helps recovering addicts still living the life he once lived. He offers guidance from his own experience and manages transitional housing. In this way, he tries to keep others from making the same mistakes that he once made, and offers them a safe place in which to make their own transitions. Paul considers sharing his story as one of the ways he can help others. “When I think about the past, I realize that I’ve wasted so much time, worried my parents, and damaged myself. I hope that the young people can learn from my tragic mistakes, and not emulate them.”

In October 2011, Paul invited his girlfriend, Lorraine, to volunteer with him at the CareNow LA clinic. Each morning, they joined other Tzu Chi volunteers at the Los Angeles Sports Arena at six o’clock to begin a long day of work. They helped the dental staff tirelessly, but still found time to laugh and enjoy the work. Finding joy in his new life, Paul has a chance to reflect on his past: “I’m looking at it differently now. The truth is I made wrong choices. I surrounded myself with bad people.” But now Paul realizes, “When you do things from your heart, there’s a value that money can’t buy.”

Paul’s transformation had to come from within, and it required hard work and great determination on his part. But Paul also credits Dr. Shirley Chen and Tzu Chi for the help and inspiration that he has received: “I recognize that Tzu Chi and Shirley have helped me greatly. I want the world to know about the power of God and the special gift of love that God has expressed through the Alhambra clinic. For this help, I am eternally grateful and would do whatever I can to express my gratitude to God and the Alhambra clinic.”

During a Tzu Chi charity concert in October 2011, Paul presents flowers to actress Lily Pan, who played a drug addict’s mother on a Da Ai Television miniseries. Photo: William Chen
When I first saw the American Dental Association (ADA) news in January about the Mission of Mercy (MOM) in New Orleans, I found so many reasons not to go; I had already signed up for the ADA “Give Kids A Smile” program, I had a monthly study group to attend that week, and I had a fully scheduled week in my own office. Did I really have the time or desire to go to New Orleans to help still more patients who I didn’t even know?

The answer was, “Not really.” At least not until I received a phone call from Dr. Lin of New Jersey, also a member of the Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA). She expressed her personal interest in joining this national outreach program, which made me start to think about that same old question again: When people need a roof over their heads and food on their tables, what can dentistry do to help them? To this, Dr. Liao of New York gave an excellent answer: “When people are suffering, in distress, and facing calamities, everything is in pain, including their teeth.” Not only that, but five months later, after the water had been pumped out, residents of New Orleans were still unable to get regular dental services because 80% of the dental offices had either been wiped out by the hurricane or had relocated. Under these circumstances, how could anyone say no to the ADA Missions of Mercy? And that’s why we decided to join the ADA MOM as a group—the Tzu Chi Dental Outreach in New Orleans.

It turned out to be the most unforgettable and efficient outreach we ever had. We were not only helping out hurricane victims, but also connecting ourselves (Tzu Chi) to the American mainstream. American doctors recognized us by our uniforms, and the city of New Orleans turned to our Great Love dental van for additional help. Thus, we are moving slowly but steadily into the American mainstream.

The statistics are in, and the results were staggering: 19,886 patient encounters in six days. This included 3,447 dental patients and a total value of care at $1,278,307.00. We were quite proud to be part of the ADA Missions of Mercy. Many thanks to those who made it happen, including the eleven doctors and 22 volunteers from the Tzu Chi family. I’d like to thank all of you guys. You are terrific. You are dentists without borders! I can never thank you enough.
need so many other things? I believe that when everything else fails in life, or when one has lost everything and has nothing left, pain of all kinds in prevalent. This usually translates into physical pain, part of which is oral. In fact, most victims of any disaster (big or small) are distressed dental patients trying to make ends meet.

Naturally, their oral health is usually not at the top of their list of necessities. But emotional and dental pain together often transform into greater suffering than one can ever imagine or endure.

This is where we come in to do our part. We not only perform what we are professionally trained to do best, but also, as Sister Shirley Chen said, to offer a little more love, comfort, and care, or even just a smile, a hug, and some consolation. A Brother Pin-Hou Chiu (who went to graduate school at the University of New Orleans) mentioned, the people of New Orleans, despite a more relaxed approach to life, all needed a little more tender loving care, encouragement, and assurance that we were there for them. And that’s exactly what we—as “Dentists Without Borders”—offered during this MOM dental outreach program in New Orleans.

To be able to take part in this first-ever, very large-scale (and very well-organized) dental outreach program, and in the process encounter such a tremendous outpouring of love and caring professionalism from dentists all over the country, discredited the notion that dentists are the most selfish, self-centered, or money-hungry of professionals.

As this was the first collaboration on a national scale for our Tzu Chi organization, to witness the compassion and spirit of each and every one of our brothers and sisters was truly an unforgettable and beautiful experience. Working with volunteers from the Virginia Dental Association (VDA) and the Remote Area Medical (RAM), we observed their dedication and devotion, and we learned that we share many philosophies regarding compassion and relief. It was most heartwarming to know that there are so many people all over who really do care and do a lot to help each other when there is a need.

Learning from their working principles while introducing those of our own organization, we accomplished a lot through the beautiful Great Love dental van. At a little social get-together one evening, we really came together with other volunteers and became friends with them. It was truly a most wonderful and touching experience for all of us at the mission.

A couple of our volunteers warrant special mention. Brother Stephen Fuang: our innovation, initiative, and relentless efforts in putting together the Great Love dental van once again showcased our spirit and the invaluable services our great organization provides. Sister Shirley Chen: your commitment to our Tzu Chi spirit, along with your loving, caring smiles, brought a brighter presence to this mission. Brother Lawrence Lai: your vision and quick responses to all our technical needs and your timely presence boosted our team’s morale. Sister Huei-ji Lin: your perseverance opened the door to this mission and to the smooth and successful execution of our joint efforts.

In closing, I hope that the collaboration with these two other wonderful groups—and hopefully more to come in the very near future—will bring us, as a group, closer together and advance us toward our vision and mission. To all those who were not able to join in this very worthwhile endeavor, let’s make every effort not to pass up the next opportunity. Let’s do all we possibly can, wherever we are, to give our sincere best towards our common goals: love and compassion.

Fear not the long distance to your goals, but rather the failure to move even one inch forward.

- Master Cheng Yen -
Learning to Walk the Right Path

Still Thoughts teaching in Tzu Chi Academy

Paulina Luan

Seven years ago, a Tzu Chi volunteer shared her joy with me on receiving a birthday present from her 15-year-old son, a student at the Tzu Chi Academy. What was surprising was that it was the son’s birthday, not the mother’s. From the Still Thoughts (Jing Si Aphorisms) the teacher taught him, the son realized that his mother had suffered a great deal of pain while in labor giving birth to him. He felt that he should show his appreciation to her on his birthday and gave her a present.

The Still Thoughts are excerpts from Dharma Master Cheng Yen’s daily talks. It is a collection of the “Words of Wisdom”. The words may be simple, but clearly point out a direction for reaching her three goals of purifying the minds, harmonizing society, and freeing the world from disaster. Tzu Chi volunteers apply the Still Thoughts in their daily lives.

Tzu Chi teachers use the Still Thoughts as a textbook for building character in their students. Their purpose is to pass on the Tzu Chi spirit of kindness, compassion, joy, and unselfish giving as well as sincerity, integrity, trust, and honesty. Still Thoughts teaching has had a profound influence on both the students and their families.

The moral awareness in people has become weaker and weaker. Selfishness dominates a society focused on gathering material wealth. In teaching the Still Thoughts, Tzu Chi teachers work with parents as well as students to cultivate the garden of love. Through mindfulness, care, and respect, the three parties practice in their daily lives.

There are currently 17 Tzu Chi Academies in ten states around United States with a total enrollment of over 3,000 students. Still Thoughts teaching is the basis of all instruction. The Tzu Chi Teachers’ Association provides supplementary teaching materials, as well as the opportunity for exchanging experiences, giving the teachers a clear direction and method in teaching. Parents play an important role in helping the students to further comprehend the true meaning of the Still Thoughts.
Thoughts and to put the Still Thoughts into practice in their daily lives. The class mothers and fathers are indeed “working partners in educating the students.” This is one of the unique features of Tzu Chi Academy. In various community service activities such as handing out relief supplies and visiting home-bound patients, convalescent homes, and physically-challenged children centers, the students come to realize the meaning and the direction of life. They know how to make good use of their lives by doing volunteer service for other people.

Dedication in education is to “give.” If we all can give without asking anything in return and guide a student to walk on the right path, there will be one more decent person in our society. We believe that we can inspire love in the society as we continue the effort of purifying the human hear through Still Thoughts teaching.

Be honest and truthful in everything you do. Be gentle and forgiving in your relationships with others.

-Master Cheng Yen-
Teaching the topic of contentment can be challenging in a preschool classroom. In fact, many adults struggle with this concept as well. With technology giving us everything at our fingertips and all the latest and greatest new gadgets designed to make our lives easier, it becomes harder and harder to find contentment in our hearts.

For some families, dinner conversation and quality family time have been replaced by staring at television, computer, tablet, and smartphone screens. We are often blinded by the idea that if we could just have a new car, make more money at work, or have a bigger house, we would be happy. Some people chase this idea for their whole lives and never achieve true happiness. Once we take off these blinders, we see how truly blessed we really are. Sometimes we need to ask ourselves, “Is my cup half full or half empty?” It’s all in how we look at the situation at hand. Our cars may be old, but they get us to work every day. We may not always agree with our boss, but we have a job and bring home money to provide for our families. We may not have the nicest house on the block, but we have a warm place to lay our heads and rest safely at night.

Often it takes something much greater, something life-changing, to truly understand the full meaning of contentment. The sudden loss of home, income, or health can force us to reexamine our own lives and lead us to truly reconsider our needs versus our wants.

My family and I went through several life-changing events during the span of just one year. We were forced to reexamine our lifestyle; we could no longer continue living as we had been. Our spending, eating habits, and weekend activities all had to change without delay. Instead of being able to help others as we had done for years, we had to humble ourselves and allow others to help us. In the midst of our family tribulations, work gave me a sense of stability; it became a sanctuary where I could temporarily forget about all the difficulties my family and I were facing.

As the months went by, I started to transform my weekly lessons in character education and everything I taught took on a deeper meaning for me. As I prepared for the theme of “contentment,” I knew it would not be an easy lesson to instill in the children. A Jing Si Aphorism we displayed in our classroom during the contentment lesson was “Desire Less; Love Earth More.” We used Master Cheng Yen’s aphorism to explore how reducing our desires can affect our everyday lives. By desiring less, we create less waste. By reducing the waste we create every day, reusing old items, donating to local charities, and recycling, we all can play a role in helping our environment. Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle plays a big role in contentment.

During one of our small group lessons we were discussing the topic of Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle with the children. We began our discussion by exploring how we can reduce our waste, and we tried to find examples in our classroom. The children were full of ideas and found that we could do better in how we use drawing paper and take care of the library books. The following day I placed several recyclable items along with a few broken items in a box to share with the children, and we used them to open a dialogue of ideas about what we can do with these items at school as well as at home. Several of the
children quickly raised their hands to share their ideas. Almost every child knew about placing the items in recycling containers, but when I showed them a ripped book and a broken teapot only a few children raised their hands with ideas about what to do with them.

One child said, “We could tape the book and be more careful next time,” while another added, “We have to throw the pot away now because it’s all broken.” Next I asked the class, “What can we do with this broken teapot instead of throwing it away?” Different ideas began to pour out, but as each idea was given there were a few children that realized why it would not work, so we had to keep thinking. As we ran out of time for this exercise, we decided to think about it some more and discuss it again the next day.

In the afternoon, we moved on to our science lesson. Since it was spring, we were learning about the garden and how plants grow. As we began pouring the soil that a parent had donated into our flower pots, we noticed that we had more seed packets than pots. The children asked what we would do with the extra seed packets, so I asked them if they had any ideas. Several ideas were brought up, including asking their mothers if they could bring extra pots from home. All of a sudden, a very excited child began jumping up and down, calling my name, and saying, “The teapot!” Once all the children heard the idea, they began to smile and cheer: “The teapot! The teapot!” We walked back into the classroom together to retrieve the teapot, then the children carefully helped spoon soil into it. The most rewarding part about being a teacher comes in moments like this, when the children are able to discover things on their own and truly enjoy what they have learned.

In the weeks that followed, many parents began telling me that their children were stopping them from throwing away plastic food containers and other recyclable items and insisting that they instead bring them to school to reuse in our garden. The children also began bringing me books with small tears to be repaired and they also helped to remind each other to use every inch of their drawing paper before getting a new sheet. Wow, it didn’t take long for the children to begin to understand such a challenging concept! I started to think, if a child can think of ways to be content with what they have, then why can’t we adults do the same? These children also began bringing these concepts that they learned at school into their everyday lives at home, and that is what all teachers live for!

For some people, change comes slowly over time. For others, it is forced upon them like a train wreck—you can see it coming but there is nothing you can do to get out of its way. Either way it happens, it is a time to reflect on the path that you have chosen and strive to learn from your past.

Before we begin to feel sorry for ourselves and fall into a depression, let’s take a deep breath and take a look around us. Can we see the man sleeping inside a cardboard box out in the rain or the single mother walking a mile and a half with her four very young children just to buy a gallon of milk? How much better do we have it right now?

Finding true contentment in our hearts is not easy, and neither is going through rough times, but a person with good character can learn from their trials to help others. If we never experience any type of hardships in our own lives, then how can we be prepared to help others, show them empathy, and serve them with compassion in our hearts?

As we travel down the road of life, what matters most is how we deal with the many bumps along the way. When we hit a bump in the road, do we lie down to die in the ditch or do we get back up to continue on our path lifting up others along the way? Which path will you choose?
A little sheepish grin from little Paulo melted my heart. Nearly a year later, I’m still so glad that the Tzu Chi Character Education Program can make such a positive impact on a third grader.

At the beginning of the school year in 2011, I noticed a boy who would be considered small for a second grader sitting in my third grade character education class at Lytle Creek Elementary in San Bernardino, California. His large, innocent brown eyes attentively followed me across the classroom as I moved around in my usual animated way. Even though I could hardly get him to raise his hand when his classmates were clamoring to be called upon, in his own timid way he let me know that he enjoyed all the discussions, stories, role-playing, and group activities. His name was Paulo.

Paulo and I carried on a friendly student-teacher relationship throughout the first semester: close but not too close, distant but not too distant. Then I covered an important character education topic called “courage.” For each topic covered in the Tzu Chi character education curriculum, content is always tailored to each grade level and activities are always age-appropriate. For the third graders, our two-part lesson on courage first focused on teasing: identifying teasing, how teasing and joking are different, how it feels to be teased, and answering the question: “if you don’t like being teased, would you do it to others?” Part two of our lesson focused on strategies that a third grader can use to deal with teasing. We role-played different scenarios and students created a wheel with different appropriate and safe responses to teasing.

Two weeks after the lesson on courage, I returned to teach a different topic. As usual, I reviewed the previous lesson with the class, and then we broke into smaller groups for discussion. When I came to Paulo’s group to review the strategies on dealing with teasing, Paulo’s homeroom teacher, Mrs. Hayworth,
commended Paulo on how well he had learned the strategies and how he was able to talk to an adult or walk away from a situation where he was being teased. I began to feel sorry for Paulo because I knew that in order to use the strategies I taught he must have been teased a lot. My heart ached for a second, but then I saw that beautiful sheepish smile on Paulo’s face. The smile was packed with a lot of gratitude and a little bit of pride. As small as Paulo was, he must have been an easy target for his schoolmates. I had hoped that none of my students would ever have to use the strategies on dealing with teasing. But the reality was that someone did, and it made a difference in his life.

Tzu Chi character education not only makes a difference in individual students’ lives, it can have powerful impacts on an entire class. For our topic on giving, the Tzu Chi volunteers and I ran a mini baking class: we made cookies out of mud and had students bake the mud cookies under the sun. Then I showed a clip from a documentary on poverty in Haiti and how some impoverished children had to resort to eating cookies made out of mud. My students were shocked and felt compelled to help. We brainstormed together to think of ways that children could help. The brainstorming exercise was meant to broaden each student’s horizons and to empower each child. I planted the seeds of kindness in the hearts of the students, and I hoped that one day, when they were able, they would take action to help others. There was no homework given to them to complete and no projects assigned to be done at home.

Two weeks later, I returned to Lytle Creek. As soon as I entered the first class, the children all pointed to the back of the class and shouted, “Look, Ms. Penny!” I walked to the back of the classroom and discovered a big pile of plastic water bottles and soda cans. The students told me that they had collected the recyclables to donate to Tzu Chi’s recycling center. They understood that empty plastic bottles and soda cans can be redeemed for money, and that the money can go into the Tzu Chi charity fund to help others. The entire class was so proud of their collective effort and I, of course, was the proudest of all for having such great students.

I walked out of that classroom with two bags of recyclables in hand and went to my second class. Much to my amazement, the kids in the second class were just as excited as the first. Except this time I didn’t see bottles and cans. I saw an old Tzu Chi bamboo bank on the homeroom teacher’s desk. Aha, these kids brought money. I had all the kids share how they had collected the money. Some had donated their allowance. Some found coins under the couch at home. Some did extra chores and got paid a nickel. Some told their families about what they learned in my class and got their sisters and brothers to donate as well.

I held up the jar to show my students that we can do so much when everyone gives a little. The jar was very heavy since it was filled to the top, mostly with pennies and nickels. Everyone learned what a powerful impact we can have on the world if each of us contributes a little.

For the past six years, Tzu Chi’s character education has consistently brought out the intrinsic kindness in these students. Our future is a little brighter and the world is filled with a little more hope because of the wonderful kids who decide to take action when they see poverty and despair.
Like a mirage, the Las Vegas skyline slowly appears on the horizon. After four and a half hours of driving from Los Angeles through the barren desert, we have arrived at this oasis for pleasure seekers. Soon, Interstate 15 takes us alongside the famous Vegas Strip, where grandiose hotels, luxury shopping malls, gourmet foods, gambling tables, and extravagant night shows beckon visitors to indulge themselves.

Yet Nain and I drive on, oblivious to the dubious pleasures advertised on both sides of the highway. We are heading past Sin City to a large isolated building in the middle of a barren desert—Clark County Detention Center. Since we took the Detention Center training class in May 2014, Nain and I have alternated with Johan Alwall to make this five-hundred-mile roundtrip nearly every month. Not once have we stopped at the Strip. The juxtaposition of the two places is extreme: the Strip is fun and pleasure, the jail anything but. The Strip is heaven on earth, the jail hell. Yet they are linked through karma—the Strip is the cause, the jail the result.

In the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha taught that all worldly pleasures eventually lead to suffering. But he also said that if we conduct ourselves appropriately according to the Noble Eightfold Path, we can leave all suffering behind and reach Nirvana. This is the good news we have come to deliver to the inmates through the words of Dharma Master Cheng Yen's *Jing Si Aphorisms*.

At the jail entrance, we are warmly greeted by the smiling faces of two Las Vegas volunteers who will join us. Their support lifts our spirit and puts our minds at ease. “This is going to be another great, fulfilling trip,” I say to myself, as if the sun has suddenly penetrated the gloomy sky. It takes
some courage for volunteers to go through a full-body search, pass through locked door after locked door, and then finally enter a windowless classroom and be locked inside with a roomful of strangers—inmates. Without compassion and a genuine commitment to the spirit of Great Love expressed in the words, “There is no one in the world that I don't love / There is no one in the world that I don't trust / There is no one in the world that I cannot forgive,” who would go out of their way to enter a jail?

The frigid faces of the inmates melt and turn into smiles as Nain teaches them to sing “Love and Care for All.” It never ceases to amaze me how her smile and uplifting spirit quickly transmit through her angelic voice to the inmates, many of whom have not experienced any love and care for a very long time. Now that they are relaxed and have lost some of the suspicion and defensiveness common to the prison environment, we begin to share the Jing Si Aphorisms.

Many inmates are eager to share during our visits. One large man shares that he used to worry too much about his upcoming trial and was unable to sleep. Since he began heeding the words on page 176—“affliction is like a poisonous snake that sleeps in the mind; the moment it is disturbed, it will bite you”—he now sleeps a lot better.

As their sharing continues, my heart begins to fill with joy. Master Cheng Yen’s teachings are so simple, yet so effective in changing people’s minds. In addition to the visits, I have been corresponding with prisoners across the U.S. since the beginning of 2014. In the first year and a half, I responded to over four hundred letters. Many wrote to tell me how Jing Si Aphorisms had changed their lives. One said that it was like a lighthouse that provided guidance to his life. Another said that the book gave him the moral compass that his parents never had. Many told me that they practice one page a day, contemplating that one teaching and trying to apply it to situations throughout the day. The inspiring stories go on and on.

I am jolted from my thoughts by a middle-aged inmate who shares that his incarceration has turned out to be a blessing. Otherwise, he would never have met Tzu Chi or known Buddhism. His candid revelation demonstrates the power of these words: they can even turn incarceration into a blessing!

Another person echoes his sentiment, commenting that the jail is a good place to practice such teachings. I jokingly

The drive is long and the scenery barren, but the reward is priceless.
tell them that I once paid fifty dollars a day for a retreat—several days away from phone, family, friends, and all outside distractions, with just basic food and lodging. Yet they have all these for free! But he replies resolutely, "No, I paid." His response pains me. How ignorant I am—he has paid with his freedom! While I can walk out of the retreat or the jail a free man at the end of class, he cannot.

Master Cheng Yen constantly reminds us that the Buddha’s teachings need to be practiced in our daily life. Therefore, in our correspondence program, we also send the quarterly *Tzu Chi USA Journal*. About seven hundred inmates across the U.S. now receive it regularly. The Journal shows them how Tzu Chi volunteers put Master’s teachings into practice all around the world by helping others unconditionally. Such selfless acts touch the hearts of many prisoners, motivating them to do good deeds within their prison environment. Many even say that they want to become Tzu Chi volunteers when they are released.

After reading the report of how Tzu Chi volunteers helped the Hurricane Sandy victims, one prisoner, who grew up in the New York area, wrote that he was especially touched that Tzu Chi volunteers were helping his hometown while he was powerless to do anything. It motivated him to better himself and help others even while in prison. One gang member repented his past wrongs and expressed his desire to repay his community by corresponding with wayward youths, to advise them not to follow his path. Such touching stories go on and on.

Inmates share their favorite *Jing Si Aphorisms*. 
A middle-aged inmate tells me, "I have been coming to the class for four months, and I shall continue to come for as long as I am here. When I am released, I want to be a Tzu Chi volunteer, too." Wow! With his statement, my entire day—getting up at five, driving four and a half hours straight, grabbing a quick bite, teaching three classes in three hours, grabbing another quick bite, then driving another four and a half hours back to Los Angeles—has been made worthwhile.

The candid sharing and heartfelt exchanges warm our hearts. We are like old friends sharing our life experiences and enjoying each other's company. We have all grown wiser by reflecting on Master's aphorisms together. Love, trust, and forgiveness fill the air.

Outside the classroom, the guards are getting impatient, waiting to lead the inmates back to their quarters, but no one seems to want to leave. As we bid farewell to each other, a bearded man shakes my hand and eagerly says, "I wish you could be here every week." He is visibly disappointed when I tell him that we came all the way from Los Angeles and can only make the trip once a month.

On this day, as with every visit, Nain and I arrive home around nine at night. Though tired physically, we are full of Dharma-joy and are already looking forward to our next trip. We are blessed to have the opportunity to help Master Cheng Yen deliver her teachings to some of the darkest corners of this world.

Audrey Cheng shares the benefits of a vegetarian diet.

"Affliction is like a poisonous snake that sleeps in the mind; the moment it is disturbed, it will bite you."
Seeing Emotion through a Lens

Peter Lin
Peter Lin, Ph.D., is a Tzu Chi volunteer in New York & a Licensed Psychologist

Since 2007, I have volunteered at a different international relief mission each year, including Haiti and South Africa. My task during the relief mission has varied each time. For example, during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, I worked with children and helped them to cope with their
loss. In 2010, I was part of the medical team in Haiti and provided crisis intervention. This year, unexpectedly, Hurricane Sandy happened in my own backyard and I have been working mainly as a photojournalist. However, one common trait in all my relief duties is the utilization of my mental health skills and psychological training.

In general, when a psychologist works in disaster relief, it is not a good idea to set up a desk in a corner with a sign: “psychologist for anyone who needs psychotherapy.” The psychologist should have a task like all other relief workers do, and perform mental health intervention as needed. Often, it is not only survivors that need psychological intervention; relief workers are also a high risk population.

Working as a photojournalist during the Sandy relief mission gave me an opportunity to walk around and provide psychological intervention when required. For example, I met a young girl on Staten Island who came with her mother to receive our debit card. She had drawn a home with many rooms, including her own room, her brother’s room, her parents’ room, and a living room. When I asked what had happened to her room, she said that she does not have one, and now her whole family is squeezed into one room. I stayed with her while her mother was busy, and tried to help her process some of her pains and wishes.

Photography is not just a form of art or journalism; it can also be therapeutic. Therapeutic photography can help heal either the photographer or the audience. Whether taking the photos or viewing the photos, multiple layers of meaning begin to emerge if one is mindful of the process. During my Sandy relief missions, my goal was to capture moments that can be therapeutic—for my audience, as well as myself.

In general, whether I am practicing psychotherapy or taking photos, two value systems have greatly influenced my work: one is the existential approach in Western psychology; the other is my lifelong Zen Buddhist practice. When I click the shutter, I hope to create a photo that can tell a story, a story that can change our own narratives. Therapeutic photography is not based on skills and techniques of photography, but the ability to explore and reflect upon oneself. The process is more important than the content.
Zen Master Dogen wrote the poem “Original Face” nearly nine centuries ago:

春は花  Flowers in the spring
夏はととぎす  Cuckoo in the summer
秋は月  Moon in the autumn
冬雪されて すずしくりけり  Chilly snow in the winter

My wish is to snap a photo that can allow viewers to be in touch with their “original face.” What are our inner values, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations in life? More importantly, what are the natures of these mental constructs? Dharma Master Cheng Yen has said that with a great disaster we should have a great awakening. What is this great awakening? When we start to know ourselves better, we begin to develop insight and wisdom. Knowing ourselves will allow us to know others better, which is the foundation of empathy and compassion. Therefore, I hope my photos can be the catalyst for self-transformation, a process of transforming our vexations into empathy and compassion.

Over the course of the Hurricane Sandy relief effort, I took several photos that are very meaningful to me. I hope they will be meaningful to you as well.
Hurricane Sandy left much of Manhattan without electricity for several days. When Tzu Chi volunteers went to serve hundreds of hurricane victims in a Chinatown shelter on October 30, they had to do so in the dark. Still, they prepared seven hundred meals using only flashlights and headlamps for light. The Tzu Chi Foundation always promotes healthy living and environmentalism, so all the meals were vegetarian and they were all delivered to the shelter in a timely manner. This was my first experience in this relief mission, and the most memorable one. It was such an expression of goodness, and these volunteers helped me to find that goodness within myself.

After visiting Chinatown, we went to assess property damage and provide hot soup on Staten Island. I did not know how damaging Sandy was until I arrived at “ground zero.” In this photo, Joanne, a volunteer, stands in someone’s dining room. The owner had been in Las Vegas during the hurricane. When he returned, this was all he had left. In Buddhism, we often talk about impermanence: that something we think will last forever can in fact be gone in an instant. But truly experiencing this impermanence is very different than just talking about it.

This gentleman was our very first care recipient. Here he is thanking every Tzu Chi volunteer. He was the first person in line, waiting from very early in the morning. What struck me the most was that he was the only person who wore a suit. He needed help and dressed his best to receive it. I saw many layers of meaning behind this, and I suddenly felt very sad when I saw this scene.
The spirit of the Tzu Chi Foundation is the spirit of gratitude, respect, and love. At the beginning of each major distribution, we have an opening ceremony to show respect toward all care recipients. Singing “God Bless America” was always part of this process. As one lady started to sing, her tears began to flow. As her tears flowed, I felt my own as well.
Not only did we assess the situation in Staten Island, we also went to many other disaster areas, such as Far Rockaway and Broad Channel in Queens. I met this gentleman in Broad Channel. When I passed by his house and asked what he needed, he joked, “a house.”

A week later, when Tzu Chi held its first large distribution in Broad Channel, we bumped into each other again, and he said, “Hey, do you remember me? You and your organization will be the story of my life. I will tell your story to my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.”

One week earlier, he had met a stranger from a strange organization and he held no expectations—of the stranger or the organization. However, just a week later, this unknown organization was the first to deliver actual financial help to him. He was very impressed and grateful for this timely assistance.

Therapeutic photos can be beneficial to oneself and others. All of these photos are very meaningful to me. The most significant one to me though, is the photo that illustrates cooking in the darkness. This was a very difficult shot to take, because it was extremely dark. The only reason I could take this photo is because I had just upgraded my old entry-level camera to a semi-professional one, a Canon 5D Mark III. Normally I would not purchase such a nice camera because it is very expensive. It was only possible this time because my father, who recently passed away, left some of his limited life savings to me.

My father, although talented, was always a poor artist with very limited financial resources. He lived frugally and was not able to make good use of his life savings. At the end of his life, he wished to join Tzu Chi Foundation, but did not have an opportunity. This photo is significant to me because it is a photo that my father and I took together. The photos I took during the Hurricane Sandy relief effort not only recorded our volunteers’ love and gratitude, but also gave me a meaningful closure with my father. When I see through the lens of my camera, I see the emotions of others, and my own.

In memory of my father
Donald arrived at nine in the morning to pick us up. It was my first full day in Port-au-Prince, and I was about to experience my first ride on a tap-tap, Haiti’s ubiquitous mode of transportation. A complete novice to Haiti, I was traveling with a group of seasoned veterans. Bornain was on his third trip, Kathy her sixth. Patrick led the team on visit number eight. All told, we were officially part of Tzu Chi’s twenty-fourth post-earthquake relief team. In just two-and-a-half years since the earthquake, twenty-three volunteer teams had been to Haiti. Others had visited in 2009 after a series of hurricanes, and more are certain to follow.

Before I climbed into the tap-tap, I noticed the single word pasted on the windshield: “BLESSING.” I would soon learn that it is a tap-tap tradition to adorn the windshield with a message, often a spiritual one, and in this regard Donald’s was no different. The crowded streets of Port-au-Prince brimmed with all manner of tap-tap—from beautifully adorned buses that seated dozens of passengers within vibrant mosaics spanning all the colors of the rainbow to unadorned pickups like Donald’s with covered benches welded into their beds—so there was a never-ending variety of messages to be read. The messages varied in language—French, Creole, English—and also in spirit, from “HUMILITY” and “RESPECT” to “DON’T TRUST NO ONE.” Many referenced Bible verses. Though their messages may have been there for years, whenever I saw something like “PROVERBS 27:1” (Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring) or “PSALMS 117:18” (The Lord chastising hath chastised me: but he hath not delivered me over to death), I always thought about the earthquake.

In fact, it was difficult to think about Haiti...
at all without considering that devastating day. It seemed impossible to move past those few seconds that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. But I slowly learned that Haiti’s problems lie much deeper and began much earlier than January 12, 2010. Even a natural disaster is not entirely natural, and the one that devastated Haiti was as much a product of the two centuries of history that preceded it as it was of the movement of the earth on that fateful afternoon.

A DIFFICULT HISTORY

It was in modern Haiti that the New World colonial project began in 1492, when Christopher Columbus established the colony of La Navidad along the northern coast and began a painful period of oppression and annihilation. Haiti became a center of the global slave trade, and its indigenous population was almost entirely exterminated.

But Haiti was also the first country south of the United States to throw off the colonial yoke. Under the leadership of former slaves, the Haitian people defeated Napoleon’s army and declared independence from France in 1804. This successful slave rebellion—the only one in world history—is a historic moment of glory that Haitians still recall fondly two centuries later.

With its independence, Haiti became the Western Hemisphere’s second oldest republic. Its first leader, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, became the region’s first black head-of-state a mere fifteen years after George Washington’s inauguration, six decades before the U.S. finally freed its slaves.

But the silver cloud of independence had its own dark lining. Already separated from its neighbors linguistically as an enclave of French surrounded by Spanish and English speakers, Haiti now became a pariah as the slave-owning powers strove to ensure that their colonial subjects would not follow Haiti’s example.

As a result, most foreign powers refused to recognize Haiti as a sovereign nation and kept it in a state of constant embargo. Cut off from vital international trade and commerce, Haiti’s leaders agreed to a humiliating treaty with France in order to earn the recognition of the former colonial master. The 1825 treaty included an indemnity equivalent to thirteen billion dollars today, accounting for inflation. Throughout history, defeated parties have paid reparations after war, but in this case alone, victorious Haiti was bullied into paying inconceivably large reparations to the defeated France. The tremendous debt was not fully paid until 1947, well over a century later. At times, as much as eighty percent of Haiti’s national revenue was being handed over to France. Though Haiti was the second New World colony to unchain itself from colonial shackles, this crippling debt, combined with political instability and linguistic, political, and geographic isolation, left Haiti forever lagging behind its neighbors.

In the two centuries that followed, Haiti suffered through a never-ending cycle of political instability. The president’s chair saw eleven different heads of state from 1900-1915 alone, and even two “emperors” and one “king” in the century prior. Since then, the Haitian people have suffered countless military coups, two decades of U.S. occupation, and the Duvalier dictatorship of 1957 to 1986. Even when the 1990s brought democratic elections, the difficulties continued: Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected twice and each time driven into exile.

Internal instability, foreign debt, and international embargoes contributed to devastating poverty, poor infrastructure, and rampant deforestation. These problems, in turn, were frequently exploited by nature: first by the annual hurricanes that flood cities, send mudslides crashing down deforested hills, devastate crops, and spread infectious diseases, and then by the historic earthquake of January 12, 2010.

As the earth shook on that fateful day, it brought to the surface all the underlying problems
that plagued the country. Hastily constructed buildings without steel reinforcements quickly tumbled, leaving underfunded local hospitals unable to keep up with the urgent need for treatment of injuries and illnesses. Though medical volunteers rushed in from around the world, they too were limited by inadequate supplies and unpredictable electricity.

With no money, no homes, and nowhere to turn, countless people congregated in makeshift tent villages that sprung up wherever there was space. With too many people tightly packed in unsanitary conditions, these areas became havens of disease, including the nation's first ever cholera outbreak, an ongoing epidemic that had killed nearly eight thousand and infected six percent of the country's population by the end of 2012.

Now, more than two years after the quake in this place where there had been so much pain and so much death, BLESSING was Donald’s constant reminder to appreciate that he was still alive. BLESSING also gave him a way to serve his community by running errands and chauffeuring for Mountain Top Ministries in Pétionville. When Lesly Pierre, Donald's old college classmate and close friend, came looking for a driver for Tzu Chi, Donald happily made the two-hour commute to help.

As the crow flies, Pétionville is only ten miles or so from the Overseas Engineering and Construction Co. (OECC), Tzu Chi's base of operations in Port-au-Prince, but distances in Haiti can be deceiving. The best roads are dotted with potholes; the worst are rutted dirt paths, obstacle courses of festering puddles. As a tap-tap passenger on these byways, shock absorbers are a heady dream. Combined with heavy traffic, the state of the roads makes travel a slow and torturous affair.

But there were places to go, so Donald drove two hours down the hill to take us northward into the countryside. We climbed into the covered bed at the back of BLESSING, and started on our trek to the Moringa farm in Pierre Payen.

A PROFOUND AFFINITY

Tzu Chi’s continuous engagement with Haiti began after the quake, but the affinity was first formed twelve years earlier. In the wake of 1998's Hurricane Georges—a disaster that left more than 150,000 homeless as it devastated the nation's agriculture—volunteers at Tzu Chi Global Headquarters in Hualien sent four shipping containers full of clothing to storm survivors. In the decade that followed, Tzu Chi volunteers in the Dominican Republic kept a compassionate eye on their neighbors to the west, holding relief distributions as necessary, such as in 2004, when Hurricane Jeanne killed more than three thousand.

In 2008, Tzu Chi grew even closer to Haiti after the island nation was battered by four storms in quick succession—Fay, Gustav, Hanna, and Ike. The barrage caused more than eight hundred deaths and exacerbated an ongoing food crisis. Sensing a desperate need, Tzu Chi Executive Director of Global Volunteers Stephen Huang led a volunteer team to Haiti and was warmly received by then-President René Préval.

Following this November 2008 visit, forty-two Tzu Chi volunteers traveled to Haiti in January 2009 to distribute food and relief goods to more than three thousand families. Their relief mission was significant not only for its immediate results, but also for the strong connections that were forged with the United Nations Stabilization Mission, OECC, and Food
For The Poor, partnerships that would prove invaluable just a year later.

On the afternoon of January 12, 2010, a 7.0-magnitude earthquake struck just twenty-five miles west of densely populated Port-au-Prince. Between the initial quake and the fifty major aftershocks that followed in the next two weeks, three hundred thousand were killed, 1.5 million were left homeless, and a full three million—one third of the entire population—were affected in some way.

Emphasizing timeliness—one of Tzu Chi’s five disaster relief principles—volunteers wasted no time in offering their assistance. An emergency coordination center was immediately set up at Tzu Chi USA Headquarters and volunteers across the country started street fundraising the very next weekend. After ensuring the situation in Port-au-Prince was sufficiently safe, then-CEO William Keh led a group of volunteers into Haiti on January 21, just nine days after the quake. As the airport in Port-au-Prince was overloaded with incoming relief supplies, this first of many volunteer groups traveled overland from neighboring Dominican Republic.

During the immediate relief period, generous donors in 36 countries contributed funds while 262 volunteers paid their own way to Port-au-Prince to hold 84 distributions that benefited 196,411 people with more than 110 tons of instant corn powder, nearly 80 tons of instant rice, and nearly 6,000 tents and 40,000 tarps, among other goods. In addition to material relief, medical volunteers held a series of free clinics, in which 73 volunteer doctors treated more than 15,000 Haitians with both general and alternative medical treatments, as well as dental and chiropractic care.

Tzu Chi’s international disaster relief motto is “first to arrive, last to leave.” Even when immediate relief ended in May 2010, volunteers remained committed to the work still to be done. Understanding that Haiti’s deep-rooted difficulties call for thorough and lasting solutions, Tzu Chi volunteers slowly transitioned to a long-term focus on sowing seeds of goodness by encouraging locals to take on projects with a volunteer spirit while supporting them with food, funding, and administrative support.

One of the early forms of this long-term support was the series of Food for Work projects held between February and April 2010, through which nearly four thousand local Haitians received hot meals in exchange for cleaning their own neighborhoods.

Beginning in March 2010, Tzu Chi provided guidance, funding, and food for a temporary school initiated by local volunteer Jean Denis Petit Pha that took 120 students out from the rubble and put them back into classrooms. After local schools reopened that fall, the temporary school grew into the Happy Campus Program, an ongoing project through which Tzu Chi now supports more than two hundred students at three primary schools by paying tuition, providing tutoring and nutritious vegetarian meals, and visiting students’ families to stress the importance of education and address individual needs.

Building on relationships forged in the aftermath of the quake, Tzu Chi and the Montreal-based Congregation of the Sisters of St. Anne broke ground on Christ the King Secretarial School and Collège Marie-Anne primary and secondary schools on January 21, 2012, and celebrated their reopening on May 17, 2013. Newly rebuilt, these schools will continue to serve hundreds of Haiti’s best and brightest young students. On October 26, 2012, Tzu Chi and the National Association of Guides in Haiti jointly broke ground on Centre Préscolaire Carmen René Durocher. When completed in late 2013, it will again serve as a beacon of hope for its local community.

Since 2011, local Tzu Chi volunteers have also tended an orchard outside Port-au-Prince where they grow, distribute, and promote moringa—
an exceptionally nutritious and drought-resistant tree that offers solutions to the plagues of malnutrition and deforestation. Like the Happy Campus Program, the orchard is entirely operated by local Haitian volunteers. They also exchange knowledge and expertise on moringa with others, such as the Cité Soleil community organization SAKALA and local philanthropist Michéelle Saint-Natus, in order to reach more communities with this valuable resource.

Inspired by the examples set by Tzu Chi volunteers from abroad, many local volunteers in Port-au-Prince are now taking the initiative to implement community aid programs. Among these, they carry out home visits to care recipients and hold medical outreaches, including a pre-Christmas event in 2012 that provided medical treatment, hygiene kits, hot meals, clean clothes, showers, and haircuts to several dozens of the poorest members of the community. The example that these volunteers have set in Port-au-Prince has even inspired the birth of a new group of volunteers in Cap-Haïtien, six hours to the north, which held relief distributions for flood survivors in late 2012.

While Tzu Chi USA continues to provide funding and guidance for volunteers in Haiti, it has left no permanent representatives and is slowly scaling back on international relief trips. More and more, the spirit of Tzu Chi in Haiti is found in the hands and hearts of local Haitian volunteers.

**CHAINS IN THE MIND**

As Donald continued to drive us toward Pierre Payen on more rural roads, we encountered fewer and fewer colorful tap-taps. But it was impossible not to notice the visual array of offices and tent communities strewn along both sides of the road: Haiti Foundation of Hope, China Red Cross, Samaritan’s Purse, USAID, and on and on.

Many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have spent decades in Haiti helping the country in a variety of ways. While these largely represent the best intentions of countless employees, volunteers, and donors all around the world, a number of encounters along this journey led me to understand that best intentions are not always enough.

Through decades of NGO involvement in Haiti, easy handouts have become the norm and a “culture of entitlement” has become deeply ingrained. Father Columbano of St. Alexandre Church invoked this phenomenon to explain why Haiti remains so poor and underdeveloped, while Erik Graham, an independent NGO consultant, described the issue as “chains in the mind.” Though the Haitian people threw off their physical shackles in the revolution, he explained, their minds have never truly been unchained. Over the years, many have become slaves to handouts as strangers deliver food, water, and clothing for nothing. Erik argued that Haiti will never progress until more people start working for themselves instead of always expecting others to do it.

Next door to the OECC, I visited the Haiti office of Food For The Poor (FFP), a Florida-based Christian relief organization that aims to connect the resources of the First World with the needs of the Third World. Similar to Tzu Chi, “Food For The Poor follows the principle that education and self-help must fortify charity work so recipients learn to break the cycle of poverty.”
Here, Director of Projects Beth Carroll told me about FFP’s work in Haiti. While the organization started with food distribution, FFP now also builds houses and delivers prison ministries and other services throughout Central and South America and the Caribbean. In Haiti, FFP not only serves food to a thousand families each morning but has also built thousands of sturdy concrete houses, schools, and community centers, and has installed water purification systems for numerous communities.

In general, FFP’s model of operation is quite different from Tzu Chi. Whereas Tzu Chi’s contributions to the community are often in the form of intangible services and relief goods, FFP’s focus is more often on infrastructure, homes, and water purification systems. But in a more fundamental sense, the two are doing the same: providing opportunities. FFP identifies strong local community leaders with “the effort and the intention” to make a difference and then works as a liaison to connect them with the financial means to see their goals achieved.

In the FFP office, Beth shared the inspiring example of a farming community in rural Artibonite. Impressed by the local community organization, FFP decided to build houses for the community’s three hundred families, upgrading their homes from straw to concrete. The houses, however, were just the first step.

As Beth explained, “Our objective isn’t just to provide that physical house, but to really change their lives.” And with the new homes, that is exactly what happened. Grateful for their new homes, many took care to decorate and maintain them. Not wanting to be outdone, their neighbors did the same. Building on this new spirit, the community leader gathered everyone together to discuss how they could improve their community. They started engaging in cleanup projects and began wisely apportioning any gifts that came in: if they were given some trees, they would distribute them first to the families that worked hardest at the most recent cleanup project.

Soon this community was thinking even bigger. They wrote a letter to the government introducing themselves as a community that was trying to improve the lives of its members but which needed better roads to succeed. There happened to be some foreign funding waiting for such a project, so they soon had newly paved roads connecting them to the outside. With the dusty dirt roads now paved, even the air quality was improved. Later, when cholera first appeared in Artibonite in October 2010, the community with the new roads was a logical place for cholera prevention training sessions to be held, so the community received vital health education, which also created some local jobs, at least temporarily.
Ultimately, through construction of some houses and a lot of local ingenuity and initiative, this community also had new roads, new jobs, better health education, and confidence in what they could achieve together. The reason a project like this worked is that the outside assistance was not an impersonal one-time handout, but rather one part of a long-term plan aimed at improving the community: a plan initiated and carried out by locals.

The houses that Food For The Poor built were significant in themselves, but their value grew exponentially by the confidence, teamwork, and potential they inspired in their recipients. As the locals had a voice in establishing goals and a hand in seeing projects through, each person had a real stake in their ultimate success or failure. When the community is at the center, the culture of entitlement can be overcome and progress can be achieved.

**TEACH A MAN TO PLANT**

As Donald drove us well past the city and the tarps of so many names, we finally reached the Pierre Payen moringa farm—a farm established by Michaele Saint-Natus and adjacent to a community built by Food For The Poor. We toured the nursery where moringa trees quickly grow from seedlings into trees, then visited the building where moringa leaves are ground into powder as a convenient nutritional supplement for the malnourished and a job for the unemployed.

We filled the sweltering bed of BLESSING with a miniature forest of young saplings to be presented to guests of the Buddha Bathing Ceremony at St. Alexandre Church: gifts that would provide guests with a plant to nourish and which would ultimately nourish them in return.

As we sat within a moringa forest, trying to keep boxes full of saplings from flying out the back at any unexpected pothole, I struck up a conversation with Lesly Pierre, one of Tzu Chi’s first seeds of hope in Haiti. Across the country in his hometown of Cap-Haïtien when the earthquake struck, Lesly’s compassionate heart led him immediately to Port-au-Prince to offer whatever help he could. When he found Tzu Chi, he found an organization whose principles matched his own; he has been a part of Tzu Chi ever since.

Like Beth, Erik, and Fr. Columbano, Lesly lamented the culture of entitlement that has become ingrained in the Haitian people—his people. By only giving, many NGOs have conditioned the people to wait for handouts instead of figuring out how to achieve for themselves. They have killed Haitian creativity.

Lesly explained that this kind of aid was unsustainable and ultimately detrimental. Instead, he suggested that NGOs should involve more Haitians in their planning process so that they can find solutions that truly fit Haiti instead of simply trying to import their own. Mostly, he stressed that there is no easy and quick solution, that real problems cannot be solved overnight. The country needs a long process of rebuilding—“maybe even fifty or a hundred years”—so patience is vital, as are education and training.

Following his meaning, I chimed in with an old proverb: “Give a man a fish, feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime.”

When Lesly started laughing, I assumed he had not understood. English was his third language, after all.

“No, I understand what you mean,” he answered. “But I don’t eat fish. I’m a vegetarian.”

Clearly, Lesly had already taken Master Cheng Yen’s teachings to heart. And with the need in Haiti just as great in 2013 as it was in 2010, the message he shared is something that should also be taken to heart: help must be given wisely. After all, if you give a man a vegetable, you feed him for a meal, but if you teach a man to plant . . .

> To appreciate others is to dignify ourselves.  
> - Master Cheng Yen -
According to a recent UN report, about 7.5 million Afghans have become homeless since the United States began bombing in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11. Some 15,000 Afghans have fled to Pakistan, and up to 6 million vulnerable Afghans who depend on outside aid to survive face a deteriorating situation.

Tzu Chi has teamed up again with Knightsbridge International to provide food and medical relief supplies, and Knightsbridge International delivered them into Afghanistan. The team departed on October 14 and stayed there for a month. This was our third partnership since 1998 in providing aid to Afghanistan.

By working together, we located three remote villages where starvation conditions existed. We arranged to deliver 130 tons of food, which should feed the entire villages for four months. In addition, we gave them 1,500 blankets and tents.

We also have helped a clinic in Khojobahldeer that is in dire need of medicine. We gave them an assortment of medicines valued at over $8,000 and a new electrocardiogram unit that the clinic didn’t have. The doctors in this clinic are amazingly proficient, performing sophisticated operations with a minimum amount of equipment and little power, makeshift recovery rooms in tents, and very sporadic supply of medicines. They were very thankful to have received these supplies, as they have nothing.

In an extremely unfortunate turn of events, two of these men were injured by artillery fire from the Taliban forces. Both men were treated at the local clinic and are recovering. The medicines and supplies that the Knightsbridge team delivered to the hospital just 10 days prior were used in the treatment of the wounds. Doctor Edward Artis of Knightsbridge used spare parts and small plastic bags to perform a colostomy on a 12-year-old boy, who was wounded in the battle and had also lost part of his parts of his foot. Later the same day, in the same location, three journalists from France and Germany were killed in the intensifying battles.

Aid workers visit a young boy in Afghan village. Photo courtesy of Knightsbridge.
This mission was filled with danger and difficulties. Team member Dr. Laws has been very ill during the mission. Dr. Artis said this was by far the toughest mission he had ever undertaken in his nearly 30 years of relief work experience. They also went into the mountains to deliver relief and because those people in the mountains were in a far worse situation. The village of Cha-Ab had not had aid delivered by any non-governmental organization for four years due to its remote location. We were the only NGO operating in this area.

After the relief team arrived in Pakistan to prepare crossing the border into Afghanistan, they had to travel the narrow roads for a full 10 days and had yet to see the Afghan border. There were further delays getting the necessary paperwork to cross the border. When our team finally located their first village, some children rushed to the supply trucks to grab the uncooked wheat, stuffing it into their mouths. An old villager told the team his daughter died from starvation just five days before the relief team arrived. The team felt so sad and regretted a delay.

The team said the Afghan people are very friendly and kind. They share whatever they have with friends even though they have little. They are not terrorists. And now with the onset of the brutal Afghan winter, the lives of tens of thousands of refugees are at risk. They need tents to save lives. The women and children are living on the bare ground with nothing sheltering them from the elements. Tzu Chi is planning our next relief mission to Afghanistan.
My mom has long been a volunteer in the Tzu Chi Foundation, just like my aunts, uncles, grandpa, grandaunts, and various other relatives. She tried many times, unsuccessfully, to get me involved when I was in high school. I remember telling her, “Mom, I believe it is a good organization; however, I’m not ready right now so please don’t force me. I promise that someday I will be ready for this on my own, but just not right now.”

My mom is a smart woman. During the summer after my freshman year in college, she used my “weak” point to get me involved by asking me to sing, play saxophone, and act in a short play with Tzu Chi Collegiate Association members who were doing a cultural exchange and visiting flood disaster care recipients in China.

I still remember the day we visited a rural village outside Beijing to distribute supplies to the needy people. We walked for about ten minutes and before we could even see the village, we heard firecrackers, drum rolls, and music. As we approached, I saw that the villagers had put on their newest clothes and organized a celebration to welcome us, the “Blue Angels” from Tzu Chi. I was very curious why the villagers would celebrate our arrival even when they had very little money. I was touched to find out that it was because Tzu Chi volunteers had given them food and other supplies after a major flood in 1993. On top of that, Tzu Chi volunteers had also rebuilt an entire village without asking for anything in return. The villagers saw us as angels or bodhisattvas that came down to earth to help relieve the suffering of all living beings.

After witnessing this, instead of joining the trip for just three or four days as I had originally planned, I decided to stay for the entire ten days so I could help out and learn more about the Tzu Chi Foundation. Upon returning home, I immediately joined the Tzu Chi Collegiate Association in San Diego. From that point on, I was addicted to this wonderful organization and I knew that my path in life would be firmly tied to Tzu Chi with no turning back.

My involvement continued in law school where I served as an advisor to collegiate volunteers at UCLA. I also worked on translation projects and helped out at various charity events and international relief work. Along the way, I got
married during my last year in law school at the age of twenty-four.

Good Life? Bad Life?

I think at that point in life I could confidently tell you, “Grace has a very good life.” However, life is filled with impermanence; you never know what will happen next. Two years into the marriage, problems surfaced. I was young and naïve and did not know how to resolve marriage issues. Miscommunications, mismatched personalities, broken hearts… One thing led to another, and I was divorced at twenty-seven.

During the months leading to the breakup, I was crying every day and felt hopeless. Thankfully, I had supportive family and friends and Tzu Chi aunts, uncles, and friends who were always there for me. The breakup happened during the time of Hurricane Katrina, and I remember lying in bed and sobbing all week. Suddenly, I thought about all the poor people who were suffering from the disaster while I was lying there sobbing my life away even though I had all the love and support of my family and friends. I had everything I could possibly need, including spiritual guidance from my Tzu Chi family and from Master Cheng Yen. I decided to go out to the shelters with my Tzu Chi family to help others in need.

During the next few days at temporary shelters, I talked to many people. They had much less than me, and many had lost their homes or even family members or friends. I realized how lucky I was. Without all I had learned in Tzu Chi, I never could have ventured out to help at disaster sites after sobbing for a week about the breakup.

Without all the spiritual guidance I received, I would not have realized how lucky I was. From that point on, I told myself that no matter how tough life becomes, I must keep my heart well. If my heart becomes ill, then everything else will collapse and life will lose its meaning.

Life is Funny...

Even after I started working as a lawyer and consultant, I became more and more involved in all aspects of volunteer work with Tzu Chi in my free time on weeknights and weekends. Thanks to my diverse experience, I was able to contribute to a variety of Tzu Chi programs, events, and activities. And thanks to the support from my boss and coworkers at Ernst & Young, where I was working as a consultant, I was able to juggle my full-time job and my volunteer work, including travel to local and international disaster sites. For the first three years after the divorce, I had a pretty good life; I was both financially independent and spiritually fulfilled.

In 2009, I started to get sick quite often and I did not know why. One day, I had a fever and felt a lump under my left ear. After a few months of misdiagnosis, the doctor decided it was a benign tumor: it should be removed but it was not urgent. I took a month leave of absence to have the tumor removed at Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital. I remember I was happily recovering from the surgery a few days later and joking with my mom, saying, “Mom, don’t worry about me, I’m not in pain. This is just like taking a vacation!” Then, my mom told me, “The tumor is malignant; it’s stage two parotid gland cancer.”

No, the sky did not collapse and I did not black out, unlike what you might see in soap operas. Three thoughts raced through my mind: “I should research more into what can be done, and find the average survival rate, so I can assess what to do now,” “Great, I get a longer vacation from work!” and lastly, “I think this is a sign for me to quit my job and finally devote myself fully to work at Tzu Chi and help people every day of my life!”

I went through another surgery and the doctor removed a few of my salivary glands and twenty or thirty lymph nodes from my neck, leaving a long scar from my ear to my neck.
Then, I quit my job at Ernst & Young since I was determined and knew what my path in life would be. A month later, I started radiation therapy.

I was going to therapy every day, Monday through Friday. I received a total of thirty treatments. The entire time, I just felt so grateful and did not feel pain. The reason why I felt grateful was because I had all the support I needed from my family, my friends, and my boyfriend. I felt so loved and protected. Whenever I walked into the waiting area, I saw many others who were sitting there looking depressed and feeling a lot of pain. Some were going through chemotherapy and radiation therapy at the same time and they felt so weak. However, I was walking into therapy feeling grateful and happy.

Although I did suffer from some side effects, they were not serious. I could not taste the flavors of my food, I had some mouth sores, and I felt tired easily. Other than that, I was fine.

Making Myself Useful

I have a very active personality; I cannot slow down. So, during radiation therapy, I spent time translating Tzu Chi songs from Chinese into English. Each day after radiation therapy I went into the recording studio to record and produce an album of English Tzu Chi songs.

Typhoon Morakot happened during that time. I remember sitting at home feeling so sad and helpless. I wanted to go out and help, but I could not. I decided that I needed to do something, so I started to translate Tzu Chi’s relief news reports into English and post them on CNN iReport and the Tzu Chi English website. It turns out that many of the reports I posted on CNN iReport were later reported on CNN’s television station. This made me very happy. Even though I could not be on-site, at least I could help spread the word about the relief efforts.

During the recovery time after my radiation therapy and surgeries, I continued to help out with anything I could think of. After the Haiti earthquake, I helped draft reports and press releases and all sorts of information to let other people know about what Tzu Chi was doing. Since I was recovering during this period of time, I also got to follow Dharma Master Cheng Yen around whenever I could. I learned so much during that period.

In March 2010, my doctor found that I had a recurrence, so I went through two more surgeries in March and April. Once again, I consider myself to be very lucky. I had so much support from my family and loved ones, plus I felt that even though life is impermanent, at least I was doing meaningful things with my life and making myself useful. So, I have no regrets.
My doctor said that the worst possible outcome was that my facial nerve could be damaged, collapsing my face and making me look like Frankenstein's monster. Maybe I would not be able to close my eyes or move the muscles in my face. I just laughed in my head, thinking, "Oh my, that is not good." I prayed and tried to make myself less nervous.

Thankfully, the moment I woke up in the recovery room, even before I could move my toes and fingers, I could feel my face and it was moving! At that moment, I was determined to constantly remind myself to be grateful for everything. When I got out of the operating room, I asked my family and loved ones to please remind me to always be grateful if I ever forget!

Before the surgery, the doctors were preparing for the worst. In the end, they had to cut one of the nerves on my neck. The doctor said there are five major nerve branches there, and the one where my tumor grew is the one that has no real function on humans. That nerve is mainly used by horses to chase away flies and mosquitoes. Once again, I was laughing my head off when I heard this. What are the odds? Besides this, I recovered very quickly. I still remember chatting with Tzu Chi friends about translation work the day after my surgery.

Gratitude to Cancer and Life's "Failures"

If not for all of these turning points in my life, I would not be who I am today: someone who is grateful, positive, and happy to be doing something meaningful every day of my life, working with Tzu Chi. Because of the divorce, I learned that true pain in life comes from the heart and mind, not the body. If not for the divorce, I do not think I would have been able to face my physical illness with courage and a positive attitude.

If not for cancer, I would not have learned to appreciate the support and love from my family and loved ones, and I would not have discovered how lucky I am. If not for cancer, I would not have learned to remind myself to be grateful at all times. If not for cancer, I would not be working with this wonderful organization full-time to devote my life for a very good cause. If not for cancer, I would not have had the chance to frequently follow Dharma Master Cheng Yen in person.

After all that has happened, I want to thank all the turning points in my life, the bad as well as the good. They have made me who I am today, and they remind me to be grateful at all times. I do not know what challenges I will face in the future, but I know whatever comes will make me a better and wiser person.

Editor's note: In June 2011, shortly after sharing her story with the Journal, Grace Chen was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL), a new cancer unrelated to the one she was treated for in 2009. She returned again to Taiwan and received a bone marrow transplant at Tzu Chi Hospital. As she recovered, she continued to volunteer from her hospital room: translating, editing, and even counselling a depressed young man over the phone.

On March 30, 2013, Grace left this world. But her love, compassion, and dedication to serve others until her final day remain an inspiration to all who knew her. Please consider registering as a bone marrow donor. You just may save a life.
In recent years, the world has seen an increasing frequency of large-scale disasters: major droughts in the U.S. Southwest, Africa, and China; floods in the U.S. Midwest, Southeast Asia, Europe, and China; wildfires in the U.S. and Europe; and an increasing number and intensity of hurricanes and typhoons affecting the Caribbean, the U.S. Southeast and Northeast, and South and East Asia.

Each of these disasters has caused enormous damage, with thousands of homes destroyed, families scattered, and hunger or starvation from failed crops, not to mention massive loss of human lives. There is growing evidence that this increase in disasters can be attributed to human activities, including pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

So what can you and I do about it? The founder of Tzu Chi, Dharma Master Cheng Yen, has been continuously urging everybody to reduce their environmental impact by living a simpler life.

In fact, this is not as difficult as it might sound. Here are three easy steps to make a real impact for the environment while at the same time improving health and quality of life:

1. Eat less meat
2. Use less air conditioning
3. Drive less

Please remember, we did not inherit the Earth from our parents; we are merely borrowing it from our grandchildren.
diabetes, and obesity.

Many might find it difficult to abruptly change from a non-vegetarian diet to a vegetarian diet, but everybody can start off by simply reducing their meat intake and gradually working towards vegetarianism. We can all do it!

2. Use less air conditioning

Air conditioning has become part and parcel of our lives, but when we use it to reduce the indoor temperature by just a few degrees, we are in fact doing major harm to the planet. No less than two-thirds of households in the United States own at least one air-conditioning unit. Together they use approximately 8% of all the electricity produced in the United States, at an annual cost of more than $15 billion to homeowners! As a result, 195 million tons of CO₂ are released into the atmosphere. That’s an average of almost two metric tons per year for each home with air conditioning!

Besides CO₂ emissions, the chemicals used in air conditioners are also very harmful to the environment. The type of refrigerant used in modern air conditioning units, HFC, is considered one of the highest global warming potential gases. In other words, for any given amount, HFC traps substantially more heat in the atmosphere than CO₂.

With such shocking statistics, how can we help? In fact, there are many ways we can reduce our dependency on air conditioning:

- Improve insulation and air sealing, which prevents heat from entering the house;
- Dispose of inefficient electrical appliances that create excess heat;
- Consider "cool" exterior finishes such as light-colored paint and roofing that absorbs less heat;
- Cool using air movement and ventilation such as ceiling or house fans;
- Avoid direct sunlight on windows by using external window shades; or
- Simply open the window at night to let the fresh air in!

If our hearts are calm and content, we will feel naturally cool!

“\nWe did not inherit the Earth from our parents; we are merely borrowing it from our grandchildren.\n”
3. Drive less

The number of vehicles in the world is steadily rising. Already in 2009, there were over 175 vehicles per 1000 people worldwide—1.2 billion cars!9 In the United States, things are even worse: there are on average 1.6 cars for every 2 people, including children! This increase in the number of cars worldwide is truly alarming, since pollution from transport is one of the main factors for air pollution and global warming. For the United States, transportation accounts for the second-largest portion (27%) of greenhouse gas emissions.7 The good news is that it is easy to reduce our carbon footprint from transportation. If the distance is not too far, consider cycling or walking. Doing so not only helps reduce CO2 emissions but also has significant health benefits. If a destination is too far for biking, consider public transportation or carpooling, or take your bike to the bus stop, subway, or train station, combining the best of both worlds!

These are some small efforts that each and every one of us can make to help protect our Mother Earth. Some people might think, "What impact does it have if I reduce my carbon footprint? My contribution is so insignificant!" But when many drops of water gather together, they create a powerful, purifying river. If one person is willing to start taking action, he or she can influence others to "get onboard." As the trend spreads, the impact will be tremendous. Saving the world is not impossible, but it takes the efforts of every single one of us!

For Further Reference

One year ago, soon after I began working as a translator for the Dharma as Water team in Honolulu, Hawaii, I was invited to come along on monthly visits to a local nursing home. Before long, these monthly visits became weekly trips to the home, and with every visit, we encountered new challenges and more reasons to be grateful. Visiting this kind of care facility on a weekly basis has shifted my own perspectives on life and the aging process in many ways. Master Cheng Yen’s teachings have helped me broaden my perspective and gain a firm sense of peace of mind as I visit this kind of environment.

One of her teachings that has resonated most deeply with me during these visits is that life is inherently impermanent. Through various incidents in my own life—accidents and injuries, family deaths, my parents’ divorce—it has become clear that anything can happen to me or any of my loved ones at any time. My experiences are not unique, and I know that, to one degree or another, nearly everyone has experienced some kind of loss. For some it may have been that a loved one moved far away, while for others it may have been the more painful loss of someone passing from this life to the next. Now, making regular visits to a nursing home, where impermanence reigns in its many forms, I find myself facing a question similar to one I have contemplated since childhood: What can we really do when this kind of impermanence looms on a daily basis?

I felt overwhelmed and intimidated simply by walking into the nursing home for the first time.

“Knowing that life is impermanent, we should treasure each moment that much more.”

Allen Freese
Facing this kind of impermanence on a regular basis has the potential to be deeply disturbing. Death is a fact of life, but it is not something that most of us are willing to wrestle with on a regular basis. Yet, this is the truth we are faced with each week, just as the residents and staff there face it every day. Most residents know, on one level or another, that they are spending their final days there. Because of this, we make it our purpose to bring the residents joy and love during this time of transition as they consciously, subconsciously, or unconsciously prepare to move from this life to the next. As weekly visitors, we need a deep-seated sense of peace to deal with this truth, but it is not easy to cultivate.

While it takes a certain amount of wherewithal on our part to maintain our own spiritual grounding in such an environment, the staff who work there every day are also in need of the spiritual tools to properly care for both the residents and themselves. So, in cooperation with the home, we have held training sessions for the staff and management on topics including “Gratitude, Respect, and Love” and the “Four Infinite Minds,” which are loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. For care providers who regularly encounter death, the goal of these training sessions is simply to reinvigorate their sense of these values. Loving-kindness, for example, is not something anyone needs to be taught, for we all have it inherently. Through the training we provide, we do our best to remind these care providers the importance of loving-kindness while providing care to each of the many residents living there. For me, some of the most provocative discussions stemming from these training sessions are those held afterwards among the staff and administrators, as they work to find better ways to integrate these values into their daily care and operations.

There is one resident in particular whom I visit each week. She is showing signs of some sort of cognitive decline and is usually sitting in the communal TV room fumbling with a soft blanket she always carries with her. At first, I wasn’t sure if she was really engaging with my presence, even when she acknowledged me. She can speak, but her words usually don’t make much sense, and most of the time she just mumbles. When there is no clear dialogue between us, all I can do is look her in the eyes, hold her hand, and smile along with the conversation I know she is trying to have with me. After several weekly visits, I came into

Honolulu volunteers visit their nursing home friends. 
Photo: Lisa Huang
the TV room one day and saw her sitting in her normal spot by the table. But this time she looked over at me, her eyes widened, and she got a big smile on her face. In clear words, she said, "Oh, you’re here! How long are you staying today?"

Moments like this—when I see and feel firsthand the joy that I can bring to someone in this environment—are the moments that reaffirm my purpose for participating in the weekly case visits. Conversely, it is also through these regular visits that I have begun to find peace for myself in the face of impermanence. By cultivating a deep sense of acceptance and appreciation of every moment, I can consciously work to create more beautiful moments and good memories to appreciate. While there is ultimately an immediate feeling of sadness as I look back on happier times, I can still do so with peace and gratitude, knowing that I have no regrets. Really, it is only because so many beautiful moments have been created that such feelings of sadness can exist in the first place. When my own grandmother passed away, would I have grieved so deeply if we had not created so many moments and memories together every summer since I was young?

Likewise, when I approach each and every resident with utmost sincerity, gratitude, respect, and love, I feel like I can create more beautiful moments and good memories with them. The excitement they feel to see me becomes a sense of excitement within myself to see them, and we are able to share a mutual sense of joy. It is like getting to spend time with my grandmother again. The joy and love I experience in these interactions does not cause me to forget about life’s impermanence, but with the knowledge that life is inherently impermanent, I can more fully appreciate every beautiful moment I am lucky enough to experience.

Death is the new beginning of birth; birth begins another life after death. Birth and death, living and dying, are all natural parts of the cycle of existence.

- Master Cheng Yen -
When my mom first started volunteering for Tzu Chi, I was already active in a local high school church youth group. Looking back, I was more of a social Christian at the time. I believed in God, I prayed, and I occasionally read the Bible, but I did not have a disciplined way of studying or practicing my faith. Meanwhile, I was fascinated by the story of Master Cheng Yen and the incredible work she did and inspired people to do. So, when I was invited to participate in the Hospital Volunteer Camp in Hualien the summer before my senior year of high school, I jumped at the opportunity.

I was so moved that I wrote my college application essay about the experience, focusing on the mural in the lobby of Hualien Tzu Chi Medical Center, the image of the Buddha comforting the sick. During the camp, I learned that the hospital was a place for healing not just the body but also the spirit, and I was moved by the dedication of the volunteers, the smiles of the patients, and the joy that comes from reducing another’s suffering. Surprisingly, the biggest mental adjustment of staying at the Jing Si Abode had to do with culture rather than religion. I did not enjoy waking up at 3:20 each morning, but I did enjoy the physical part of the morning recitations. When everyone sang the offering song before meals, I simply prayed a prayer similar to the words of the song.

After I returned home, I became more involved with Tzu Chi and even started a Tzu Shao group for high school students in New Jersey. I was inspired by Master Cheng Yen and the message that carrying out volunteer work not only helps recipients, but also helps and changes the volunteers.

Around that time I started to question traditional, organized Christianity. My questions were not being addressed or discussed in youth group and the people there were not
very encouraging about my involvement in Tzu Chi, so I stopped attending youth group. Though I still identified myself as a Christian, I did so with the caveat that I was spiritual but not religious because I did not want to be tied to organized religion.

Since I have been involved with Tzu Chi for many years, I am sometimes asked whether I have ever thought about becoming a Buddhist. Even during the periods of my most intense involvement in college, I never seriously did. For a long time I could not pinpoint why I felt this way, except that, to me, Buddhism always felt more like a philosophy because I connected with it on an intellectual level but not on an emotional or spiritual level. All along, I admired the work Tzu Chi was doing and I was always touched by volunteers’ testimonies of transformation. Whenever I prayed to be somewhere where I could be of great use, I always found myself back in Tzu Chi. But I never felt a desire to become a Buddhist.

In August 2009, my Tzu Chi involvement deepened as I started translating with the Dharma as Water team. Not long after, I began attending Grace Cathedral in January 2010. Ever since, these two aspects of my life have enhanced and strengthened each other. I constantly see echoes of one in the other. In the very first sermon I heard at Grace Cathedral, an Episcopal church, the priest said that we should always remember to focus on the moon and not the finger pointing to the moon. I laughed immediately, because this was also a constant reminder from Master De Ren, who was the Tzu Ching advisor in Hualien.

Master Cheng Yen has said that she is not creating a new form of Buddhism, but rather taking Buddhism back to its roots. She emphasizes upholding and practicing the Buddha's teachings. Similarly, the Dean of Grace Cathedral, Dr. Jane Shaw, writes that the earliest converts to Christianity were asked not “What do you believe?” but “How has your life been transformed?” and that we should return to this perspective. So I find that I am attracted to people and places that root their practice in the beginnings of their tradition and stress the importance of personal transformation and the quality of interactions with others, rather than focusing on a list of defined beliefs and rituals.

In my translation work with Dharma as Water, I have become much more aware of how language and words can both expand and restrict my understanding. The realizations I attain from actively studying and practicing Christianity also help me translate Master Cheng Yen’s words across cultures because I am not just translating the words but also the spirit behind the words.

For example, the word “xīn” in Chinese can mean both “heart” and “mind,” but when we translate, we need to pick one. This shows me that seeing the heart and mind dualistically is a somewhat artificial separation. Similarly, in Hebrew the word “lelab” means “mind” and “will” and “heart.” Knowing this, I am very conscious when I read the Bible that it is a translated work that needs to be read in the context of the language and time in which it was written. Instead of trying to parse the words themselves, I need to find the meanings to which they point.

At the same time, I am learning tremendous respect and appreciation for the words. When I translate Master Cheng Yen’s teachings on the Water Repentance Sutra, I try to convey exactly what is being said: no more and no less. I cannot gloss over something because I do not fully understand it, nor can I add something extra because I understand it well. This makes me very aware of what I read. Meanwhile, I
am taking a class called Education for Ministry which helps students think about their personal theology and how they can minister to others in their daily living. We read the Old Testament last year and are reading the New Testament this year. In this class, too, I have learned the importance of reading and reflecting on the original words because they often differ from the stories we hear growing up or in popular culture.

Frequently I encounter echoes across the two worlds, often quite unexpectedly:

In Tzu Chi, we talk about turning this turbid world into a Pure Land. Similarly, I learned that some people believe that the Kingdom of God is here on earth; it is not a destination, but something we take an active role in creating right here, right now.

I used to translate the “Tzu” of Tzu Chi as “kindness,” but then learned that a more accurate translation is “loving-kindness.” Soon after, I started noticing the word “loving-kindness” when it came up in my daily Bible readings or in the Psalms. Now, that concept and feeling has been reinforced in my mind.

In Buddhism, the Threefold Karma is karma of speech, body, and mind. At church, we confess to God that “we have sinned against you, through our own fault, in thought, word, and deed.”

In fact, I even see a great similarity in the path of each religion’s teaching. For forty-two years, the Buddha used countless skillful means to teach the Dharma in various ways, but he later forsook that method for direct teaching. The Buddha explained when expounding the Lotus Sutra that the path to enlightenment is straight. There is only one path, a broad and spacious path, which is the Bodhisattva Path. When Jesus came, he pierced through the numerous temple laws that were in place and said that there are two commandments above all: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (adapted from Mark 12:28-34). Seeing this, I understood that in both cases the many means and laws point to the most fundamental tenets of the religion. It is easy to get caught up in the laundry list of rules, but we must find the true message at the heart.

Translation work for Tzu Chi strengthens my faith because the similarities unlock my understanding of certain concepts and the differences reaffirm why I am a Christian. I believe that there are many paths to God, or to the Tathagata or the Ultimate Truth, and this happens to be mine. As Dr. Robert Gregg, emeritus professor of Religious Studies at Stanford, said during a recent Grace Cathedral forum, “Listening to others will help you grow in your understanding of your own tradition.” That is definitely true for me.
Each year, Tzu Chi offices nationwide award college scholarships to hundreds of talented high school graduates, helping them overcome financial difficulties in pursuit of their educational dreams. Here, Western Region Director Michael Tsai presents a scholarship to a deserving student in San Dimas, California, on May 28, 2016. Photo: Emerald Hsu

Ever since the devastating earthquake of January 2010, Tzu Chi has never left the side of the Haitian people. From June 17 to 22, 2016, volunteers from the United States and Haiti held a major rice distribution in Cité Soleil, Port-au-Prince, to ensure that residents of this extremely impoverished area have sufficient food to eat. Photo: Grace Wong

To celebrate Tzu Chi's fiftieth anniversary, the Tzu Chi Youth Orchestra of Long Island (TCYOLI) held a special concert at Carnegie Hall in Midtown Manhattan, New York City, on June 11, 2016. Here, volunteers bring to life the Bodhisattva Guanyin's thousand arms, with which she aids suffering beings. Photo: Peter Lin
On June 12, 2016, Tzu Chi volunteers and Tzu Shao high school volunteers visited St. Edna Subacute & Rehabilitation Center in Santa Ana, California, to bring a fun day of games and activities to the senior residents. Here, a young volunteer serves cake to a resident. Photo: Chifen Lin

In the face of ever more frequent disasters, it's important to always be prepared. On June 11, 2016, volunteers at the Northwest Region Office in San Jose, California, practiced turning the office into an emergency shelter by preparing cots, Jing Si multipurpose foldable beds, and eco-friendly blankets. Photo: Wanna Chen

During the INPEX (Invention & New Product Exposition) Trade Show—held June 7 to 9 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—Tzu Chi was again recognized for innovations in disaster relief. Inventions such as the portable disaster relief furniture set and foldable furniture system packaging received multiple awards. Photo: Phanny Yang
As Texas was devastated by widespread flooding in spring 2016, Tzu Chi volunteers traveled to several affected areas to provide support and relief. On June 25, Tzu Chi and the Red Cross held a joint distribution in Rosenberg to deliver debit cards, eco-blankets, and warm care to affected residents. Photo: Roger Lin

On May 22, 2016, Tzu Chi Mid-Atlantic Region held its first ever major dental clinic in Cedar Grove, New Jersey. Medical students and volunteers from New York City and Long Island also participated in the event to provide much-needed services to low-income, uninsured patients. Photo: Renjie Li

When Morita Tzu Chi Elementary School in Tijuana, Mexico, held its annual graduation ceremony on July 16, 2016, U.S. volunteers joined the students in their celebration. Here, volunteers present awards and scholarships to outstanding graduates. Photo: Tenshang Joh
Sudden torrential rainfall on June 23, 2016, caused the third-deadliest flood in West Virginia’s history. On July 16, Tzu Chi volunteers from several surrounding states joined with the Red Cross to distribute emergency debit cards that will help Elkview residents get back on their feet. Photo: Dali Li

For the fifteenth consecutive year, Tzu Chi volunteers collected and sorted recyclables during the Washington D.C. Dragon Boat Festival of May 21 to 22, 2016. Volunteers braved the cold, wet weather to do their part for the environment. Photo: Mark Tsai

During the first annual California Nonprofits Day—held at the State Capitol in Sacramento on June 22, 2016—Tzu Chi had the distinct honor of being recognized twice. State Senator Connie Leyva named Tzu Chi Western Region as her district’s “Nonprofit of the Year” for its service in Southern California, while Assemblymember Kansen Chu commended Tzu Chi Northwest Region’s work in Northern California. Photo: Nancy Ku

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On May 28, 2016, teachers at the Tzu Chi school in Chiang Mai, Thailand, led their students to rural Fang district to visit charity recipient families and learn by giving of themselves while witnessing the suffering of others. Students delivered gifts of food and performed for bedridden individuals.

Photo: Rongcheng Zhan

In the midst of the Southern Hemisphere winter, Tzu Chi volunteers distributed food supplies, scarves, and wool caps to elementary school students in the Mariscal Lopez village of Itakyry, Paraguay, on July 3, 2016.

Photo: Yizi Chen

Heavy rains in May and June 2016 led to severe flooding in several European countries. On July 10, volunteers from six of these countries held a gift card distribution in hard-hit Salbris, France, as part of the ongoing relief effort. Photo provided by Tzu Chi France.
Tzu Chi volunteers are active in fifty countries and regions worldwide, and have delivered relief in more than ninety countries across the globe. With Tzu Chi volunteers widely spread across every continent and time zone, there is always a volunteer somewhere serving with respect, gratitude, and love.

On July 9, 2016, Tzu Chi volunteers enjoyed their regular visit with residents of Abbotsford Nursing Home in Manchester, England. This time, they were joined by volunteer Hana Salfiti (center), visiting from Jordan. Photo: Suzhen Wang

On Bohol Island in the Philippines, hundreds of people have been forced to abandon employment or education due to vision problems. On June 11 and 12, 2016, Tzu Chi volunteers organized a free vision clinic to help these people regain their sight and step forward into a bright future. Photo: Jiamei Li

Widespread flooding in 2011 affected tens of thousands of people in Honduras, driving many from their homes. Local Tzu Chi volunteer Jorge Chang led U.S. Tzu Chi volunteers into the disaster region almost immediately, and he and his team have continued to provide relief ever since. Between 2011 and 2016, Tzu Chi constructed 408 homes for residents of Marcovia and Choluteca. On June 24, 2016, the final phase—a Great Love Village of 244 homes—was unveiled. Volunteers hope these sturdy homes will serve the residents of Choluteca for many years to come. Photo: Grace Wong
Tzu Chi volunteers visited the Rohingya Education Centre in Permatang Pauh, Penang, Malaysia, on June 11, 2016, to support education for young Rohingya refugees. Volunteers helped improve the students’ learning environment by making repairs and putting up curtains to reduce glare.

Photo: Ruifen Chen

The wildfire that began outside Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada, on May 1, 2016, burned more than 1.5 million acres over the course of two months, becoming the costliest disaster in Canadian history. Tzu Chi volunteers across Canada provided support throughout the course of the disaster. Here, volunteers in Vancouver, British Columbia, prepare relief supplies on May 16, to be sent to families evacuated from the disaster zone.

Photo: Lisa Han

Tzu Chi volunteers held a free medical clinic in Jabaquara, São Paulo, Brazil, on June 19, 2016, to protect the health of local residents. Here, volunteers help patients fill out their forms.

Photo: Qiuqin Zeng
On July 2, 2016, volunteers visited the Tzu Chi children’s center in San Agustín Acasaguastlán, Guatemala, to distribute backpacks, stationery, and school supplies to the local children. Photo: Suxin Zhang

On June 25, 2016, volunteers held a special gathering in Perugia, Italy, to show their love and care for refugees who have fled from their homes in northern Africa. Here, one refugee shares his story. Photo provided by Tzu Chi Global Headquarters

On May 20 to 22, 2016, Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA) volunteers from Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines traveled to Colombo, Sri Lanka, to hold a free medical outreach. Here, volunteers and a nurse check on a patient. Photo: Lingfeng Wang

On June 25, 2016, volunteers held a special gathering in Perugia, Italy, to show their love and care for refugees who have fled from their homes in northern Africa. Here, one refugee shares his story. Photo provided by Tzu Chi Global Headquarters
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In 1966, Dharma Master Cheng Yen founded the Tzu Chi Merits Society in Hualien with the support of thirty housewives who each put aside a couple cents of their grocery money every day to establish a charity fund. In the first year, they helped a total of thirty-one elderly, ill, and poor people from fifteen families. As word spread, more people participated and the program gathered strength. It spread beyond Hualien: first across the island and then around the world.

Today, Tzu Chi is a nonprofit charitable organization with ten million volunteers and donors in fifty countries worldwide. Over the past fifty years, Tzu Chi’s four missions—Charity, Medicine, Education, and Humanistic Culture—have grown from the seeds of gratitude, respect, and love, and Tzu Chi’s activities have expanded to include international disaster relief, bone marrow donation, community volunteerism, and environmental conservation.

In the United States, Tzu Chi operates nine regional service areas with more than eighty offices and facilities nationwide. Volunteers give back to their local communities through family services, emergency disaster relief, homeless services, school support programs, college scholarships, income tax reporting assistance, relief distributions, holiday care packs, free and low-cost medical clinics and outreaches, preventive health education, cancer support groups, character education curricula, community education classes, and production of positive, inspiring media.

Whenever disaster strikes at home or abroad, Tzu Chi volunteers deliver cash aid, hot meals, and emergency relief supplies directly into the hands of disaster survivors. Over the years, US Tzu Chi volunteers have actively provided relief after such major disasters as 9/11, Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, and earthquakes in Haiti, Japan, and Nepal.

In recent years, Tzu Chi volunteers’ charitable work has been increasingly recognized by the global community. Tzu Chi was granted special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 2010 and honored as a White House Champion of Change in 2013. Dharma Master Cheng Yen was presented with the Roosevelt Institute’s FDR Distinguished Public Service Award and named to the TIME 100 list of the world’s most influential people in 2011, and honored with the Rotary International Award of Honor in 2014.
Have the courage and fortitude to do what is right and persevere until the end.

Jing Si Aphorism by Dharma Master Cheng Yen