The spirit of the Lotus Sutra is the Bodhisattva Way
It teaches us how to walk the Bodhisattva-path
Whether rich or poor,
everyone can walk the Bodhisattva-path
and everyone can help others

As long as we take the teachings to heart and apply them in our actions,
we will find abundant spiritual riches within
This spiritual wealth is the wealth of true principles
Though it is intangible and only in our minds,
it's uses are forever inexhaustible

People with Dharma-wealth in their hearts are spiritually rich
They will always be able to exercise the endless love in their hearts
and contribute their strength to help all people in the world
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Dharma Master Cheng Yen

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TZU CHI: A BRIEF HISTORY
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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.
“Bodhisattvas are not idols made of wood; real Bodhisattvas are people who eat, talk, work and relieve suffering in times of need.”

Visit any Buddhist temple and you will see images of Bodhisattvas, great enlightened beings who manifest amazing abilities. Perhaps the most iconic of these is the image of Guanyin, with her thousand eyes observing the suffering in the world and her thousand hands reaching out to relieve those who are in distress. Yet Dharma Master Cheng Yen constantly reminds her disciples that Bodhisattvas are not only found in temples; they are in fact all around us. They are ordinary people, just like you and me. So, in this issue of the Tzu Chi USA Journal, you are invited to read about many other ordinary people, who, through their mindfulness, dedication and loving hearts, are doing extraordinary things for their communities and the world.

For instance, in San Francisco’s low-income neighborhoods of Bayview-Hunter’s Point, the small figure of Jingduan Xie looms large. Through her simple acts of cooking and greeting parents and teachers, she has made Tzu Chi’s love felt in a community too often neglected by others. Or take the volunteers from the Heart Lotus Life Program, whose consistent and caring visits to elders in the final stages of their lives reach across divides of decades and even chasms of hurt.

Sometimes it is the smallest of actions that end up making a difference. You will read about Natlie Lee, a young high school student, who shared a moment of pure connection with an unlikely partner as the two bonded over a classic song. And in a story from the Buddha’s time, you will find out what kind of effect a prison guard’s single act of compassion has in his many lifetimes to come.

It may seem that ordinary people making small changes in their daily lives is a far cry from the superhuman powers of the thousand-hand, thousand-eye Guanyin Bodhisattva. But as Master Cheng Yen herself realized before founding Tzu Chi, when 500 people come together and join their hearts as one, aren’t they equal to one Guanyin? New York Tzu Chi volunteers actualized this vision quite literally in their charity performance last year, and it can be seen in the spirit of Tzu Chi volunteers working in communities all around the world.

Indeed, I am very grateful to say it is this same spirit which brings this journal to life, as dozens of dedicated volunteers and staff, many young and contributing for the first time, have made up the thousands of eyes and hands needed to share these inspiring stories. They are all Bodhisattvas. Everyone has this potential; it is merely a matter of always being mindful.

Alex Grabiner
Editor-in-Chief
CHARITY ART PERFORMANCE

THOUSANDS
OF HELPING HANDS

Dallas ▪ Sat, September 9
Music Hall at Fair Park
909 1st Avenue
Dallas, TX 75210

Houston ▪ Sat / Sun, September 16 & 17
Hobby Center for the Performing Arts
800 Bagby Street
Houston, TX 77002

Silicon Valley ▪ Sat / Sun, September 23 & 24
Flint Center for the Performing Arts
21250 Stevens Creek Boulevard
Cupertino, CA 95014

Los Angeles ▪ Sun, October 1
Microsoft Theater
777 Chick Hearn Court
Los Angeles, CA 90015

tzuchi.us

Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation

China Disabled People’s Performing Art Troupe
A n organization like Tzu Chi provides so many inspiring and rewarding opportunities to work with other people. It truly takes the efforts of many people for things to run smoothly, so I am grateful for all Tzu Chi volunteers, all of our staff, and the many Tzu Chi supporters who put their collective effort and love into Tzu Chi. This is what allows us to help so many people in the United States and abroad.

The other key element in Tzu Chi’s continuing efforts is Master Cheng Yen’s guidance. Listening to her teachings and seeking to implement them in our everyday lives is a constant practice for Tzu Chi volunteers, and helps us to move ahead in the right direction. This is also why we are exploring different avenues of helping people connect with us and with the teachings. For instance, we recently produced a series of microfilms presenting Tzu Chi to new audiences in fresh ways.

In addition, to mark the milestone of their 25th anniversary, the Tzu Chi Central Region will hold a “Thousands of Helping Hands” charity concert. After the success of the performance in New York last year, the Dallas Office, along with Houston, Northern California and US Headquarters, will hold their own event to share this spirit of love with the wider community.

Tzu Chi volunteers not only work in their local regional areas, but also continue their efforts abroad in the Americas and the Caribbean. I am especially grateful for our teams of volunteers who have been caring for communities in Haiti and Ecuador. Even now, we are helping to rebuild a church in Canoa, one of the affected areas, so that the disaster survivors will have a spiritual refuge. The coordination of these long-term recovery projects requires a lot of mindfulness and good communication.

In any of our efforts, communication is of great importance. As technological advances bring our world closer and closer together, I am committed to helping Tzu Chi stay on top of these new modes of communication and to improving our infrastructure so we can plant more seeds of love around the world. I’m so grateful for our IT department, website team, and all the different departments involved in creating a good foundation for the future of Tzu Chi USA. We are building this future together, and I believe that Tzu Chi’s many thousands of helping hands will always be present in times of need.

### From the CEO

Hay Huang
In cultivating blessings, one grain of rice stores the power of the world.

In exercising wisdom, one speck of dust contains the principles of the universe.

A seed as tiny as a speck of dust can grow into a great tree; even the tiniest effort holds unlimited potential.

Time passes by so quickly. Last year, Tzu Chi celebrated its 50th anniversary, and we are now in our 51st year of service.

When we first established the Tzu Chi Merit Association in 1966, we monastics did not yet have an abode of our own. We lodged at Pu Ming Temple, farmed on a rented lot, and supported ourselves through manual labor. Although life was difficult, our resolve was firm, so we took on the work of helping the poor. Every month on the day of our distribution, our care recipients came to collect the rice we gave as aid. At the time, we always hoped that we could serve them lunch before they went home. However, it was difficult enough to support ourselves, much less provide for others. We often did not have any rice to cook for our own meals; how could we provide lunch to the care recipients? The only thing we could do was to borrow rice and oil from Pu Ming Temple to cook porridge.

Outside, we had a metal barrel as our stove, with firewood burning at the bottom and a large metal pot above. When the water boiled, we poured in the half ladle of rice that we borrowed. Every month, the number of care recipients grew, so each time we would add one more scoop of water to the porridge to be able to feed everyone. During one particular distribution, after the rice was thoroughly cooked, we lifted the lid and saw those few grains of rice floating in the water, which perfectly reflected the blue sky, white clouds, hazy mountains and green trees. At that moment, I realized that “One grain of rice contains the whole world.” Indeed, one grain of rice is so precious!

50 years have passed in the blink of an eye. Although we went through countless hardships, we stayed firm in our spiritual aspirations at every step of the way. Looking back, I never found any of this to be a hardship. Instead, I was filled with gratitude. No matter how many difficulties and troubles we faced, there were always so many people who formed aspirations as well, forging the way, supporting me by my side or steadfastly bringing up the rear. They have supported and accompanied me all this way. Truly, they paved the path with love and led each other with long-lasting compassion. Now as of 2016, out of the world’s 197 countries, the footprints of Tzu Chi’s love have already been left in more than 90 of them, almost half of the planet.

This past year, Pope Francis designated the year as the Jubilee of Mercy. On November 3rd, he held a conference in Vatican City with many
religious representatives attending, including representatives from Tzu Chi. During the conference, Pope Francis expressed that in response to the natural disasters and manmade calamities continually occurring, along with the constant destruction of the environment, a spirit of compassion and love is needed to nourish people's hearts.

In fact, all religions follow the spirit of compassion and love. The true essence of any religion is to extend selfless great love to all beings. So if we have true faith, we will never find ourselves in conflict with others. The world is full of suffering, so all religions should be working together to manifest the power of love.

The true power of love can be found in everyone's heart. By recognizing our blessings, we can be grateful for the things we have. Then we must open our hearts to extend our care to all who are suffering in the world. It is only by witnessing suffering and recognizing our own blessings that we will not take our blessings for granted. When we can awaken the love in our hearts and benefit others, our societies and our world can be peaceful and harmonious.

"Compassion and love nourish people's hearts—
With compassion, we care for the world.
With great love, we practice giving."

Tzu Chi is a spiritual training ground where we can cultivate blessings. So, we should never look down on any small contribution, as even the slightest effort holds unlimited potential. We must always maintain the spirit that we had in those early years, the spirit of overcoming hardships and obstacles. Back then, even when we did not have enough rice to cook, we still persevered in working to bring together everyone's small contributions of love to help those in suffering.

Tzu Chi is also a spiritual training ground where we can exercise wisdom. When we go among people, we are training our wisdom so we can manifest our potential for goodness and bring benefit and aid to all sentient beings.

A great tree starts with a seed no bigger than a speck of dust, so if we are mindful, in even the smallest things we can experience the subtle and wondrous principles of the world, then open our hearts and minds to walk on the great path of true principles.

Presently, we are seeing more and more extreme weather in our world, and disasters are occurring more and more frequently. In the face of these conditions, we must make an even greater effort to bring purity to people's minds. If we can all nurture compassion, eliminate our greed and desire, tame our arrogance, and create blessings, we can free the world from disasters. To do so, we must cultivate compassion and exercise our wisdom. So, please, let us always be mindful!
“Whatever amount of money you want me to give is fine, but don’t ask me to volunteer.” Twenty years ago, these were the words of current Central Region Executive Director Yuan-Liang Ling when he was approached by Tzu Chi volunteers. He could never have predicted how much his sentiments would change.

As a successful businessman prominent in the Overseas Chinese community, Ling was well-connected in his adopted home city of Dallas. However, when a close friend of Ling passed away at 39 from liver cancer, Ling and his wife, Mei Hwa, were stunned by the selfless efforts of a group of individuals they had never seen before. These individuals were Tzu Chi volunteers. Upon hearing about Ling’s friend, the volunteers went out of their way to support this man in his final moments and even to assist in his memorial ceremony. Ling and Mei Hwa were stunned by the selfless efforts of a group of individuals they had never seen before. These individuals were Tzu Chi volunteers. Upon hearing about Ling’s friend, the volunteers went out of their way to support this man in his final moments and even to assist in his memorial ceremony. Ling and Mei Hwa were simultaneously moved and intrigued by these volunteers, and Mei Hwa decided to approach the director of the group to ask if she could participate in future events. Warmly welcomed into the Tzu Chi family, Mei Hwa quickly became a dedicated volunteer – so much so that Ling felt compelled to advise her, “Just do the volunteer work and come back. Be sure not to take up any administrative responsibilities in the organization.”

As Mei Hwa continued volunteering with Tzu Chi, the director suggested that Mei Hwa should bring her husband out to volunteer with them. Each time Mei Hwa asked Ling to join, he declined. And he persistently turned down these offers for the next four years. In January 2001, Mei Hwa once again asked Ling to join the group. A major earthquake had just struck El Salvador, and the Dallas chapter was joining hands with chapters in other locations to provide disaster relief for those affected. This time, for reasons he himself cannot fully explain, Ling finally agreed. When asked why this event in particular drew him out, Ling simply says that he felt his affinities with Tzu Chi had matured and that the time was right. “I very naturally became involved.”

In two trips to the Central American nation, Ling’s outlook on life changed dramatically. Prior to these trips, Ling had lived a comfortable life of leisure, often spending his days on the golf course with friends or traveling internationally with family. But in El Salvador, when he witnessed the homes engulfed by landslides, the families devastated by losses of their loved ones, and the extraordinarily difficult lives that Salvadorans led even without disasters, Ling came to realize just how fortunate he and his family were. From then on, Ling committed to devoting his time and resources to helping those less fortunate than himself. And thus, Ling’s story with Tzu Chi began to unfold.

In 2004, Ling became the Director of the Tzu Chi Dallas office. One year later, in August
2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. Tens of thousands of refugees were funneled through a transfer station in Dallas. 25,000 stayed. Every hotel reached maximum occupancy, while convention centers and recreation centers were packed to the brim. The city was in a state of utter chaos, and no one seemed to have a solution. Ling, however, refused to watch from the sidelines. In the days following the disaster, he and other volunteers waited outside the doors of the Dallas City Hall from morning to evening, hoping to speak to the mayor and his staff to find out how Tzu Chi could help. Finally, after nearly a week of waiting, Ling received the news he was waiting for – that he could come back the following day for an opportunity to help the refugees.

The next morning, Ling dutifully returned and found himself in the middle of a large-scale distribution hosted by FEMA. With millions of dollars in relief funds on the premises, military and law enforcement groups swarmed the facilities, and an air of tension weighed down on everyone present. Ling watched as hundreds of people passed through the distribution cycle every hour. To him, these were hundreds of lives that Tzu Chi had missed the opportunity to touch. As if FEMA representatives had read his mind, they soon approached Ling to ask him what he needed to set up an operation. With little prepared, Ling asked for just two tables and two hours for preparation. He quickly scrambled to make phone calls and purchase loaded gift cards for distribution. Over the course of that evening and the following morning, Tzu Chi Dallas distributed approximately $2 million in relief funds. But things didn't stop there. Led by Ling, Tzu Chi Dallas hosted a series of disaster relief distributions in the following weeks. Volunteers traveled to a different city each day and

“Remarkably, their grassroots efforts of waiting outside a city hall had transformed into distributions in city halls across multiple states.”
set up operations in city halls and convention centers across the Gulf Coast. Remarkably, their grassroots efforts of waiting outside a city hall had transformed into distributions in city halls across multiple states. Ling’s unwavering resolve had helped to establish Tzu Chi Dallas as a dependable source of love and support amidst one of the most destructive disasters in US history.

Since then, Tzu Chi Dallas has become an important member of the Texas Division of Emergency Management. State governmental agencies took notice of Tzu Chi’s operations during distributions held for Hurricane Katrina and subsequent disasters, and they later invited Tzu Chi to join their future emergency relief efforts.

Now, whenever disaster strikes in Texas and surrounding areas, Tzu Chi Dallas is at the forefront of relief efforts, working alongside various other major relief organizations to reach as many affected families and individuals as possible. Under the guidance of Ling, Tzu Chi Dallas volunteers have positioned themselves to offer helping hands and comforting smiles to countless suffering beings.

Ling’s personal transformation became the driving force behind Tzu Chi Dallas’s journey to reach more hearts and touch more lives. The hand that withheld its assistance 20 years ago had become the hand that would unite thousands of others. It comes as no surprise, then, that Ling pioneered the effort in bringing the Thousands of Helping Hands charity performance to different Tzu Chi regions across the US, beginning with a performance in Dallas this September that coincides with the chapter’s 25-year anniversary. Guided by a simple aspiration to help those in need and powered by an unwavering resolve, Ling truly exemplifies the spirit of a Bodhisattva. The reluctant businessman of then would never have imagined a life devoted to serving others. But the tireless volunteer of now wouldn’t have it any other way. 🧘

Regan Wang is a recent graduate of University of Texas at Austin and currently works as a management and technology consultant. As a Tzu Chi Collegiate Association alumnus, he continues to support his college chapter and volunteer with Tzu Chi.
Bruce Knotts is a former U.S. diplomat who is now the director for the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office. There, he works on issues such as social justice and environmental conservation. A year ago, he visited Master Cheng Yen in Taiwan and quickly decided to become her disciple.

How did you hear about Tzu Chi?

For the last 9 years, I’ve been representing the Unitarian Universalist Association at the UN. I chair the NGO/Department of Public Information Executive Committee. Tzu Chi is also a member of that committee.

I work together with Tzu Chi representatives about ethical eating and climate change; these collaborations have been going on for a couple of years.

Can you talk about your initial meeting with Master Cheng Yen?

Then, last January, I was invited to give a speech in Taipei. Lisa Yu, a Tzu Chi commissioner, guided me around the Taipei Hospital and to the Da Ai TV station, and she wanted me to meet with Master. I didn’t have a chance to see Master during that trip, but I arranged to come back to see her a few months later.

We were kindred spirits: she had the answers I was looking for.

In the past, I have met Mother Teresa and other women like her. They have been very important in my own spiritual development. When I met Master, it was like, Aha, here’s another one! We were kindred spirits: she had the answers I was looking for. In many ways she was carrying a spirit I had met before, particularly in Mother Teresa.
What would you say was the most surprising thing for you about Tzu Chi?

In the past, I did a lot of work with refugees in West Africa. The US Government was sending wheat, but most West Africans are rice eaters. There was this grain they had never eaten before and really didn't know how to prepare. I remember a woman taking a clump of this wheat that had been cooked and shoving it in my face, saying, “Would you want to eat this?” It had no flavor, it was really awful. Then I learned how Master Cheng Yen always asks when food is delivered to refugees, “Do they like the taste?” That was something amazing to me. I have sweated a lot about calorie counts, but I never actually thought about considering how it tasted. That was a level of compassion and concern that astounded me.

What is your impression of Tzu Chi volunteers?

To be quite honest with you, that’s probably the part that’s most seductive to me. I don’t have a good relationship with my own family... The fact that I have friends who are people of color has not gone down well with my family members. Furthermore, I am gay and married to a black man. I was so impressed when my husband came to the abode. Master and everyone there treated him and us like family. This is the huge extended family that I have been missing. I was told, “This is your home.” I haven’t had a place on Earth where I could say, “This is my home, this is where my people live.” Until now.

What do you see in the future?

I’m making a statement that I’m a Tzu Chi disciple. I’m going to make a very strong statement for vegetarianism. Master thinks that by making this public, that could have a great effect on people. I have two speaking engagements coming up in Southern California and Alabama, and I’ve just sent emails to both locations to tell them I’m vegetarian.

Master has given me a Dharma name which is all about spreading the Dharma. I’m going to do my best to spread the Dharma, as little as I understand it.

Mark Ladao is a first year journalist student at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. He also works as a copy editor with the Dharma as Water translation team.
It is a Friday morning. Jingduan Xie steps out of her front door onto the streets, readying herself for a new day. The bags of heavy material in her arms contrast sharply with the 72-year-old volunteer’s petite stature. As she walks towards the bus stop, she silently reviews her supplies, making sure she hasn’t forgotten anything. Boarding the bus is only the beginning of her long journey to the elementary school in Bayview-Hunters Point where she will cook up and serve a delicious vegetarian lunch for the teachers and staff. The journey is long and complex. After traveling by bus, she will transfer to the BART, then to light rail, and then finally to bus again. Two and a half hours later, she finds herself in one of the only places in San Francisco where no one dares to deliver pizzas and there are no supermarkets. For someone who doesn’t speak much English, it is not an easy trip by any account. However, with her strong determination to serve others, rain or shine, she has been making this weekly journey since 2009.

“"The bags of heavy material in her arms contrast sharply with the 72-year-old volunteer’s petite stature.”
These weekly trips have been an integral part of her life for the past several years. It all started with her decision to approach Roxanne Buchwitz, the lead for the Happy Campus Program in Northern California. The Happy Campus Program, first started in 2007, encompasses a variety of projects that aim to address the needs of students and families in underserved communities such as San Francisco’s Bayview-Hunters Point. “I really want to contribute my tiny effort to this program to make sure that we can really implement the Dharma in the Western world,” she told Roxanne. Roxanne was surprised to hear this. Jingduan had joined Tzu Chi as a volunteer a few years back, but had been inactive for two years before suddenly coming to the office that day. She did not know Jingduan well, but decided to hear her out. “Ok. What do you think you can do?” Roxanne replied. Jingduan already knew how she wanted to help: “Well, I’ll go to a school and I will cook vegetarian meals.” From that point on, she would show up every week without fail, supplies in hand and a smile on her face, ready to cook.

She started out cooking once-a-week lunches for the teachers and staff at the elementary school. Tzu Chi volunteers used these lunches as a platform to interact with teachers, to discuss ongoing issues with them and identify students that may need help, all in hopes of providing the students and families with holistic care and support. Soon her ambitions grew beyond the once-a-week lunches. As she spent more time at the school, she noticed those students who clearly relied on school lunches for daily nourishment, and wondered what, if anything, they had waiting for them at home. That’s when Jingduan decided to cook dinner for all the students at the school, every day. She would use the Jing Si Instant Rice products and prepare them in a way that appealed to the children’s palettes. The dinner service program became a quick but quiet success. It was not until four years after Jingduan started the free dinner for students that the principal took notice. “You guys have been cooking dinner for them?” Since the Happy Campus Program activities take place after school, it was not surprising that some of these efforts went undetected. “I am writing a grant for you.” And just like that, what started out as a simple expression of compassion has now turned into a district-wide free dinner program.

But Jingduan is much more than just a great cook with a big heart. Every time, before she began cooking with the other volunteers, she would tell them, “Just remember that we are here for a Dharma-assembly. Whatever we do and whatever we say, let’s pay attention to our thoughts, our actions, and our words.” After they were done for the day, she would also gather the volunteers to hold a brief sharing session so that everyone could reflect upon themselves and share what they learned with each other. To Jingduan, all the work that she does is an opportunity to put the Dharma into practice and transform people’s lives. Interestingly, in her two years of inactivity in Tzu Chi, before she started cooking for the Happy Campus Program, she was only focused on cultivating herself. She would chant the Buddha’s name or study at home. She kept up with Master Cheng Yen’s teachings, but she had little desire to go out and interact with people. Then one day, she suddenly realized that to truly cultivate herself, she had to engage with people while maintaining a pure mind. Though this was the realization of an instant, she has continued to hold fast to these principles. She would constantly
remind herself and the people around to not lose focus on their true purpose while doing their work.

Kitchens can be stressful environments, and people working in the kitchens can be negatively affected by such an environment, becoming anxious and agitated. But when Jingduan cooks, she is very focused. “She concentrates, just like meditating; it is zen cooking,” recalls Roxanne. The peacefulness and calmness in Jingduan’s cooking reassures and calms the volunteers working alongside her. Putting her wisdom into physical practice, she does not just talk the talk. She leads by example and is a true stabilizing force for all the volunteers. “She is someone who really practices the Bodhisattva path; she has that unwavering will,” said Roxanne. “She is our behind-the-scenes Dharma teacher.”

With this unwavering will, her presence at the school every day has also played a critical role in earning the community’s trust. She has proven that Tzu Chi is not only there to help, but is also there to stay, a steadfast companion in the quest to make this a better place for all. She is always there greeting the parents and the teachers. Some volunteers say that she is basically Tzu Chi’s “ambassador at school.” It was not an easy thing for Tzu Chi to truly become part of the fabric of this community.

“\When Jingduan cooks, she is very focused. “She concentrates, just like meditating; it is zen cooking.”\"
Historically, many organizations have come and left, making promises but falling short. Yet it is the presence of volunteers like her that assure community members there is always someone to take care of them, enabling Tzu Chi to truly become a permanent member of the community.

After 9 years serving as the lead of the vegetarian meals operations of the Happy Campus Program, Jingduan is now 72. She observed recently that her journey has become more tiring, and her hands move slower while she prepares meals. It occurs to her now that it is about time for her to pass down her role to another volunteer, whom she has mentored for the past three years. Though she is ready to let someone else take the lead, Jingduan still has a strong sense of responsibility and an unwavering will. She has pledged to continue to support the program by remaining a physical presence there. There is deeper meaning in her passing down her role than just handing off the work. It is also a symbol of her unwavering will to continue to provide care and support for the community she loves.

Allen Chung is a Tzu Ching (Tzu Chi Collegiate Association) alumni who graduated from UCLA in 2016. He has been involved in Tzu Chi for 5 years. He enjoys volunteering and also hearing the touching stories and experiences shared by other volunteers.
Check out Tzu Chi USA Journal’s new enhanced eBook for a more immersive reading experience. Download a copy or read it right on your phone, tablet, computer, or e-reader, complete with news videos, links, and more!

View current and past issues at tzuchi.us/journal or tzuchipost.us/category/tzu-chi-usa-journal. In addition to every Journal issue from 2012 to the present, you can find much more, including Tzu Chi brochures in five languages and counting. Don’t forget to click “Subscribe” to be notified whenever a new publication is available.
Elizabeth smiled!!! Elizabeth smiled!!!

I said these words with glee to every member of our team as we left the nursing home. I wanted everyone to hear them and to see the reaction they would bring. As I said them, I saw the shock on each of their faces, which soon gave way to excitement and celebration. I looked for Stephanie in order to share the news with her. Sister Stephanie, a senior volunteer, had been visiting residents for over 20 years and had accumulated many stories like this, stories of changing and transforming others, of making a difference in people’s lives. But Elizabeth’s smile was our team’s first story, the biggest achievement of our five months of visits.

E lizabeth smiled!!! Elizabeth smiled!!!

I had been there when Elizabeth was admitted into the nursing home. Vivian, our nursing home contact, had informed us of a resident who could benefit from our visits. Now we were meeting on the nursing home’s upper floor with Elizabeth’s son, Peter, who was talking about his mother. As Peter described Elizabeth’s life leading up to her stay in the nursing home, I tried to pick up any information that I could use to make a connection with Peter or Elizabeth.

“She used to be a very active member in her church.”

“Up until recently, she was able to drive and do things on her own, but she suffered a fall and her condition was getting worse, so I had to move her out of her house; now, she is no longer mobile.”

My thoughts wandered as Peter continued to share. It was strange thinking about how I became involved in all this in the first place. I had started as a volunteer after a friend from college invited me to one of the local Tzu Chi events, a homeless hot meal service. At the time, I never thought much about what I was doing. I had a vague desire to help people, but that was all. As one thing led to another, I became more involved in Tzu Chi and even ended up joining the Heart Lotus Life Program, leading the end of life care program with other volunteers. But even though I was visiting weekly, I felt awkward interacting with people in the nursing home. My desire to

*Never lose courage. Never lose faith. Nothing in this world is impossible when you are determined.*

~ Dharma Master Cheng Yen ~

Devin Makizuru / Photos provided by the Dharma as Water Team
help others was there, and it had deepened over time to the point where I considered it a “mission” to help others. But I still lacked something. I had always been an introvert, and I had always felt uncomfortable when meeting new people. Even repeated visits were not doing much to decrease my feeling of being out of place, and beyond that...

“You can bring pictures!” Stephanie’s voice cut through my thoughts as I snapped back to the present.

“They really help. This is actually a great opportunity to spend time with your mother and show her how much you appreciate her.”

I nodded in agreement. I wondered how Stephanie could be so confident and at ease. Peter nodded along as well, and we continued our discussion. Although Peter smiled as he talked about his mother, I sensed something that went deeper. Something unresolved...maybe even a sense of resignation.

Then we visited.

On that first visit to Elizabeth, we went in with Peter. Elizabeth lay on her side, slightly curled up and facing the window. She kept looking outside; it was clear where she wanted to be. Stephanie and I stood on one side of her bed, while Peter came around to the other side to face her. The room was quiet and cool.

Elizabeth’s eyes focused on Peter with a chilling intensity. At the time, though I couldn’t quite say what emotion it was that Elizabeth was feeling, I later recognized what she was expressing in her stare: Anger.

Peter sighed.

We assured Peter that we would see Elizabeth regularly as we ended the first visit. I really didn't know what we could
I didn’t think I could change anything about her condition, and I certainly did not want to set up any kind of expectations.

Over the next few weeks, we visited Elizabeth. We were determined to help Elizabeth feel better. After all, we were specifically requested to take special scare of her; this was what we were there to do. And so we visited.

Interacting with Elizabeth was like interacting with a stone wall. She lay on her bed, unmoving. She never spoke; she never laughed. She chose not to.

Week 1: We asked her about her family. I tried sharing some childhood stories. No response. “We’ll try again next week.”

Week 2: We sat with her and thanked her for letting us come to visit. No response. “We’ll try again next week.”

Week 3: We spoke to her and offered her some stickers but got no response. “Maybe next week will be better...”

Week 4:...
Week 5:...
Week...

Every time we visited, no matter what we did, we got the same reaction: a look of boredom and indifference. Occasionally, she’d pretend to be asleep. But at least she didn’t glare at us. That was one thing we picked up on. Although it bothered us that she never spoke, at the same time, I felt somewhat relieved. If she had scolded us or yelled at us, I don’t know what would have happened to my resolve.

The weeks turned into months. Elizabeth would often look away, gazing into the distance. If Peter happened to be there, she would stare at him in anger, with the same expression we saw the first time we visited. Our Heart Lotus team continued to visit, but as time went on, I became more and more complacent and confused. I talked to her, I was there, but I really didn’t feel anything. Don’t we call this “equanimity”? Isn’t it good to have no expectations? Or maybe this was something different. Maybe I had just given up. Maybe I had determined that I couldn’t do anything through our visits, and if that was the case, what was the point of our visits at all? Did I even care about the residents I was visiting?

During one particular visit, I saw Stephanie kneeling by Elizabeth’s side. “We love you Elizabeth...I know you’re angry at being here...I know you’re not happy, but we love you Elizabeth. We love you.”

The longer time passed, the more my resolve slipped away, and doubt, which had somehow always been there from the start, grew in my
mind. Did Stephanie see something I didn’t? How could she remain hopeful? Was Elizabeth getting any better, any happier? It had been months, and still, there was no difference that I could see.

It wasn’t until our team visited Taiwan that things changed. We were invited to the Jing Si Abode in Hualien to attend some annual meetings. This was our chance to observe and listen to volunteers share about the work they had done over the past year. After the general meetings, all groups were invited to meet with Master individually. It was in one of these meetings when Master spoke to a group volunteers after their presentation.

“You are doing this work, but you’re missing the point. You’re not reaching the heart of the matter. You must have faith. I am not saying this to lecture you, these are my sincere thoughts. I want to give you this teaching.”

“You must have faith in the work that you do. It is only with faith that will you be able to sustain your initial aspirations and inspire the love in people’s hearts. This is why faith is so important.”

At that moment I was almost brought to tears. I was struck by those words. For some reason, my tendency had been to doubt. I was doing the work, but I didn’t have faith. I didn’t have faith that we could really succeed. I suddenly remembered the Four Great Vows.

“There are countless sentient beings, and I vow to deliver them all.”

“There are inexhaustible amounts of afflictions, and I vow to eliminate them all.”

“There are infinite Dharma-paths, and I vow to learn them all.”

“The path to Buddhahood is supreme, and I vow to attain it.”

The very core of our work is the truth that there is suffering, and the purpose of our work is to “eliminate suffering.” To help people, we must go among them. But how could I hope to help people if I gave up on them so easily? Master’s words that day made me realize that whatever our aspirations are, we need to have faith that we will achieve them. The road that we have ahead of us is often long, and our goals often seem so far away. Without faith, how would we be able to continue to move forward amidst challenges and setbacks? Without faltering or giving up on what we aspired to do? I realized then what it was that I had been lacking all along.

“"You must have faith in the work that you do. It is only with faith that will you be able to sustain your initial aspirations and inspire the love in people’s hearts."”
On the day we visited Elizabeth after we had returned, I actually shared on the concept of faith during one of our group discussions. Before the visit during one of our Heart Lotus Activities, we were asked to reflect on how we could improve a specific relationship that we had with someone. We thought about one quality that we could cultivate to improve that relationship. The quality I chose for myself was “faith.” This time around, I was eager to see Elizabeth. I believed in myself and in my team, I believed in what we were trying to do, and I believed in her. Something had changed in me. Hearing Master’s words woke me up, and I felt renewed with the realization I had gained.

Walking into Elizabeth’s room, we greeted her. Johan, one of our team members, offered to massage her hands. I held her hand in mine and offered her some stickers. This time, I put my heart into our interaction without fear, doubt, or affliction. As we were leaving, I thought I saw Elizabeth smile. I looked again. It was a small smile, barely there. And if you hadn’t been visiting frequently, if you weren’t familiar with her expressions, you might not be able to tell. But I could tell. And at that moment, I knew that we had made a difference.

Devin Makizuru has been volunteering since 2012 and has been assisting in spearheading the Heart Lotus Life Program. He used to work as a teacher before becoming a staff of the Dharma as Water team in Hawaii.
February 17, 2002 - First Grade

Tick-tock, 8 o’clock. Time seems to move slower with every note I play. “Mama,” I say again, “How was that?” My mother looks up from the music book and says firmly, “Wawa, (my nickname) work a bit harder. Ms. Sverjensky says you need to emphasize the forte and pianos. Remember your crescendos. Come on, one more time.” I look at her, eyes pleading to stop before I turn around and practice the piece once more. Before I know it, I’m crying. Tears drip down my face onto the seat, and I wipe my nose on the sleeve of my shirt. I look over to my mom. I’ve been practicing for hours. I want to stop. Why won’t she let me stop? I continue crying as my fingers run along the keys, until I finally hear a familiar voice call out, “Wawa, it’s time for bed. Turn off the lights, remember to push in the chair.” I wipe my nose once more before I shut the cover and run to the bathroom. It’s 9:00pm.

October 22, 2003 - Third Grade

Tick-tock. My mom looks at her watch. “Wawa, if you don’t hurry up, you’re staying home.” I let out a sigh and look at the clock. It’s a Wednesday night and our condo just lost power. My brother, mother and I are supposed to go to my grandmother’s house for the night. “But mama,” I whimper, “I can’t figure out the answer, can you help me?” My mother shakes her head and looks at me. “Wawa, I know you know this; think harder.” I grip my pencil in frustration and look down at my homework; what other conjunctions were there? A few hours pass, and we’re at my grandparents’ house. I wake up startled and glance at the kitchen wall; it’s 3a.m. Drowsy, I put my pencil down and finally crawl to bed.

February 16, 2008 - Eighth Grade

Tick-tock. Bells begin ringing from the second floor, as the clock shifts to 1:30pm. I look up from my seat and fling open the car door. Time for Chinese School. Mom and I came a bit early today in preparation for the annual Speech Contest. While she went inside to help set up,
I stayed in the car to run over my speech a few more times. This year will be a bit more difficult than others. While my mom has always made my brother and I write our own speeches for the contest, I started writing mine a bit late and didn't have time to run through it with her until this morning. I sigh and swing my backpack over my shoulder. With my papers in hand, I slam the car door shut and run through the front doors. Here goes nothing.

There are so many things I never understood as a child, such as why my mom so adamantly wanted me to practice piano every day, or why she would have my brother and I search for the answer ourselves to a question we didn't know. She would even have us write our own speeches for Chinese School even though our teachers offered to write them for us. Somehow, she always seemed to make things a bit more challenging. It wasn't until I was older that I realized why she instilled these practices in us. Although my mother may have been my harshest critic at times, it was because of her constant pushing that I learned the importance of self-determination. Through every additional scale I would practice, or every answer I would find in my textbook, I learned that I was the one in control of my success. When my brother and I earned awards for our speeches, it was because the stories were true to our own experiences, and they came from our hearts. Looking back now, it is because of my mom that I became the person I am today.

I have truly been very fortunate, as my mother has always supported me and my dreams. In late middle school, my mom became the local D.C. Tzu Ching (Tzu Chi Collegiate Assoc.) Advisor. It was because of her involvement that I became more familiar with this youth group, and I dreamed of creating something similar for kids my age. One year later, in 2010, I began this journey and helped form D.C. Tzu Shao (high school volunteers). With a simple wish to bring friends together and do good, I learned what it meant to persevere through difficult and at times uncomfortable situations in order to bring a single vision to life. Asking high schoolers to spend their Saturday mornings with us was difficult to say the least,
and my friends and I had no idea where to begin; but we led with our hearts and learned along the way. With my mom’s encouragement, and with practice, determination, and persistence, we slowly persuaded others to join our cause. By the time the 2011 Earthquake hit Japan, we were able to gather a dozen of our close friends to host a local benefit concert. Through six months of preparation, rehearsal, and outreach, we raised more than $500 for the cause. It was amazing to see so many people support our efforts for Japan, and even more worthwhile to know that our hard work had paid off.

After graduating high school, I decided to gather my experiences and establish a Tzu Ching chapter at the University of Maryland. As a freshman in college, I faced many doubtful individuals who all tried to persuade me to wait another year before beginning. Even though I didn’t know what would come next, or how to move forward, I was determined to build the community I envisioned. Slowly but surely, I gathered friends, peers, and acquaintances to join me in this new chapter of my life. Over the next few years, we faced challenges in recruiting members, becoming recognized, and making an impact. However, each of us was passionate about bringing our vision to the community. In the course of four years, UMD Tzu Ching became a community of more than 150 members who engaged in more than 1300 hours of service and community outreach. While the organization continues to grow, it is the passion and determination of each individual that transformed UMD Tzu Ching into the community it is today. Throughout it all, my mom had been there with me. Through her example, I realized that change begins with us. All of the things I have achieved come back to the lessons she has taught me. When I think of “ordinary people doing extraordinary things,” I always think of my mom.

June 15, 2017 – 21 years old

Tick-tock. The clock ticks a few minutes past 12:30 AM on a late Thursday night as I peek through the kitchen doorway. My mother sits by the kitchen table and types away rapidly on her computer. Her responsibilities as D.C. Tzu Chi Academy’s school principal have accumulated in these last few weeks, and papers are stacked high beside her. She doesn’t notice my peeking eyes until I call out to her.

“Mama!” I shout. A few seconds pass. “Yes?” she replies, eyes still focused on her screen. “I love you,” I say. She stops typing and looks up at me, “I love you too sweetie; is something wrong?” I smile and reply, “No, nothing; that’s all I wanted to say.” I laugh, and she gives me another look before shifting her attention back down to the computer.

While she doesn’t know it, it’s nights like these that I cherish most. My mother and I, always connected, working side by side into the early hours of the morning.

Thank you mama, for everything. Because of you, I learned what it means to have courage and faith in what I do. You are my greatest role model.

Stephanie Shao is a graduating senior at University of Maryland, College Park majoring in family science. She has volunteered with Tzu Chi since an early age, and looks forward to continuing as a Tzu Chi Collegiate Association alumna.
At the end of February, San Jose, California was struck by the most severe flood in the past century. On March 12, 2017, Tzu Chi Northwest Region collaborated with American Red Cross in their disaster relief efforts, distributing cash cards for the victims, offering them the most practical assistance. Here, volunteers explain how to use the cash cards. 

Photo: Anthony Wei

Tzu Chi Las Vegas Service Center holds two to three free dental clinics every year in the old town area. On April 23, 2017, a free dental clinic was led by the Tzu Chi Western Region Office director, Michael Tsai. Nearly 100 volunteers woke up early morning in the dark and worked until exhausted, all to safeguard the health of the homeless population. 

Photo: Zhenhe Chen

On April 22, 2017, Tzu Chi volunteers of Dayton, Ohio supported Earth Day and went to the park and cleaned up the trash, showing their love and care for the planet through actions. 

Photo: Guocheng Lin
On April 22, 2017, the city of Columbus, Ohio, held an Earth Day event and Tzu Chi Columbus Service Center volunteers participated in the event for the first time. While interacting with the public, they promoted the concept of environmental protection as well as Ethical Eating Day on January 11. Volunteers introduce the environmental fabrics made from recycled plastic bottles to members of the public.

Photo: Bornain Chiu
On April 14, 2017, students from the Chinese language major at West Point Academy came to visit the New York Tzu Chi office. Apart from experiencing the Zen-style Jing Si tea ceremony, they also learned about Tzu Chi volunteers’ work in the US and around the world through guided tours and videos. They were especially moved by Tzu Chi volunteers’ spirit of great love in helping Syrian refugees.

Photo: Xianhong Luo

On March 12, 2017, Tzu Chi Academy Miami and Coral Springs Chinese School held a Southern Florida Chinese Academy Annual Sports Day in Weston Park in collaboration with other schools. Through the event, they promoted the Chinese language and shared life skills with the students. During the sports day, parents and volunteers were both cheerleaders and photographers for the students.

Photo: Changzhi Cai

On May 2, 2017, Tzu Chi Southern Region volunteers went to Landis Elementary School to hold a teachers’ appreciation luncheon. They promoted raising funds for Syrian refugee children with bamboo banks. Sister Luomei Geng shared with the students in each class the hardship faced by these refugee children. Hearing this, everyone raised their hands to take a bamboo bank home and save money to help the Syrian refugees.

Photo: Lijuan Xiao
On April 9, 2017, Tzu Chi Mid-Atlantic Region held a free dental clinic at the regional office. The clinic site was filled with an atmosphere of love and care. Seven dental chairs served 47 patients. Dr. Yulei Guo met a patient who had not seen a dentist for eighteen years. She patiently and compassionately helped remove the many years of built-up dental plaque for her.

Photo: Renjie Li

Tzu Chi USA Headquarters recently launched the Mobile Food Pantry Program. On March 1, 2017, volunteers went to Jones Elementary School in San Bernardino to give out fruits, vegetables and other fresh produce, as well as daily goods to help the needy families. Here, volunteers inspect the fruits and vegetables to ensure their quality.

Photo: James Huang

On February 4, 2017, Tzu Chi Greater Washington DC Region started the annual free tax filing service for low-income families. A piece of calligraphy, reading “Tzu Chi School of Buddhism is a path among the people,” on the walls of the office inspired the volunteers in their service. Even small matters like this are a chance for the volunteers to reflect on themselves.

Photo: Mark Tsai
“Everyone can be a part of the thousand helping hands. What we can do as individuals is limited, but if we have a thousand hands working together, we can help a lot of people.” This is how Tzu Chi volunteer Yihan Bao describes the spirit and concept behind the Thousands of Helping Hands performance held last October in New York’s Lincoln Center.

It is also this spirit that, manifested in the everyday lives of many Tzu Chi volunteers, continues to inspire Yihan and others like her to carry on Tzu Chi’s work of helping others around the world.

For Yihan, her Tzu Chi journey began when she was brought to the Ohio State University Tzu Chi Collegiate Association chapter by a Tzu Chi volunteer. When Yihan watched an episode of Master Cheng Yen’s “Wisdom at Dawn,” she became intrigued and was inspired to learn more about Tzu Chi’s philosophy and teachings. As she began to see how these teachings helped her improve her life, she became ever more motivated to volunteer with Tzu Chi. With the rewarding feeling that came from doing volunteer work, Yihan continued to take on more and more responsibility within Tzu Chi. Gradually, she came to feel that she was doing what she was truly meant to do. Moreover, she had become inspired by numerous Collegiate Association alumni and Tzu Chi commissioners, and she hoped that one day she could be like them. As Yihan explains, “With all of these great people around me as role models, I was inspired to catch up to their fast pace. I wanted to be like them, so that’s how I started my Tzu Chi journey.”

After graduation, Yihan moved to New York for work, and it was here that Tzu Chi would have a profound impact on her life.

In New York, Yihan first worked as a business consultant, constantly traveling to different cities around the United States. In fact, she was flying so often that the only time she spent at home was during the weekends. Although her parents were very proud of her and in other people’s eyes she was successful, she still felt that something was lacking. She had a feeling that this just was not what she wanted to spend her life doing. After volunteering at Tzu Chi for years, she knew in her
heart that working for Tzu Chi was what she truly wanted to do. The more Tzu Chi events she went to, the stronger her resolve to work for Tzu Chi became. Once she decided that she wanted to work for Tzu Chi, she told her family. Yet this only created conflict within her family, so she remained unable to fulfill her dream. Still, despite the difficulty, she maintained her resolve. Eventually, she entered commissioner training and became certified as Tzu Chi commissioner in 2015. This brought her one step closer to that goal of being like all those role models who inspired her. During the ceremony, when Master Cheng Yen handed her the commissioner badge, she told Yihan that she hoped Yihan would draw closer to her. Surprised at first, the thought occurred to Yihan that the way for her to draw closer to Master was to make the career change she had been contemplating. With her newfound determination, nothing could stop her from realizing her dream. She talked to her mother again. “With the encouragement I felt from Master and my mom’s support, I finally made the decision.”
As Tzu Chi staff, Yihan was assigned a number of different types of work. Along with what she was specifically assigned, she was also willing to take on whatever else came her way, learning many different things as she went. When the Thousands of Helping Hands performance came around, she began helping out with promoting the event. With the Lincoln Center rented, the planning and promotion all had to be executed at the highest levels, and in order to be able to successfully promote this event, everyone had to be clear about the meaning behind the performance. Then they would be able to use social media, traditional media and even going door-to-door to let people know about the event. Their ultimate goal was for the people who came to the performance to be touched and inspired. Yihan recalls their intentions at that time. “We wanted the people we invited to the performance to feel they could be one of the thousand helping hands. Tzu Chi volunteers are all like helping hands; when we go out into the community, we extend our hands to help those in need. We hoped the people we talked to would be inspired to do the same.” Thus, the invitation to attend the performance was actually an invitation to extend their own hands to help others as well. With the power to get people to make a positive impact in their communities, this performance would naturally be compelling, touching and memorable to all who took the time to come watch.

With this intention, the promotion team and many young volunteers began to put this spirit of the thousand helping hands into action, promoting the performance in many creative ways. Meanwhile, there were many other volunteers exemplifying this wonderful spirit,
though perhaps less visibly. According to Yihan, what was truly inspiring and motivating for her were the Tzu Chi volunteers who did so much work behind the scenes. The volunteers were extremely committed and were determined to make the event as successful as possible. They would even go out to restaurants or order take out several times a day, just so they could talk to the owners about the performance! What’s more, they always held fast to the hope that, after being touched by the performance, these people would also become Tzu Chi volunteers.

Not only were the volunteers hard at work behind the scenes promoting and coordinating the program, but some took the stage during the performance as well. Yihan herself participated in the opening drum and bell performance, something she calls a very “unique experience.” This amazing opportunity of getting to perform and support the event, her first large-scale project as both a staff member and a volunteer, reinforced her decision to work with Tzu Chi; she knew clearly that Tzu Chi was where she was meant to be.

For Yihan, seeing how all the volunteers worked together and accommodated each other revealed the beautiful harmony of the group. One person whom Yihan found particularly inspiring was Tzu Chi volunteer Ms. Tu, the program coordinator. “Because all the volunteers were busy, she would actually go to different cities. So, instead of the volunteers having to go to New York to practice, she actually went to the different sites, even to different cities, to accommodate their schedule, even as far away as Boston.” When the performance was first proposed, many volunteers questioned whether it could even be done, due to its magnitude. But with all the hard work from the volunteers, even what seemed impossible became possible. Their hard work in connecting more and more people mirrored the spirit of the thousand-handed Guanyin Bodhisattva who would soon be starring in the performance.

When the main act, the China Disabled People’s Performing Art Troupe, finally took the stage, the audience was amazed and deeply touched. Yet as inspiring as their performance was, behind the scenes, they seemed like ordinary people who had gotten to where they were through years of hard work in the face of many challenges. Their hard work and diligence, their beautiful harmony as a troupe, touched not only the audience but the volunteers as well.
their own children. The performers of this troupe, in the many ways they have transcended adversity, truly show that nothing is impossible. If everyone can come together as one, wonderful things can happen. By the same principles, if people across the globe, despite all of their differences, can come together to help each other and help other people, that power can change the world.

From planning, promoting, coordinating, all the way to performing, all the struggles and obstacles the New York volunteers faced only served to strengthen their resolve. They were determined to bring this spirit of a thousand helping hands to life. On the night of the performance, Yihan saw how the incredible results were only possible due to everyone coming together throughout the process. “Everyone has their different backgrounds and working styles, but somehow we can work together. And the different backgrounds, personalities, and working styles don't matter at all because we have the same mindset; we want to show people the thousand helping hands of Tzu Chi and inspire more people to join us and help others.” This was always the goal of the event: to inspire and move the audience to take action; to come together and become one of the thousand helping hands and, in doing so, change the world for the better.

Michael Lee is a rising junior pursuing his Bachelor’s degree in journalism at Ohio State University. He has been volunteering with Tzu Chi since he was a child and currently serves as an officer in the Tzu Chi Collegiate Association chapter at Ohio State University.

Thousands of Helping Hands at Lincoln Center, New York, 16th October 2016. Photo: Hui Liu
Children of the Earth

Music and Lyrics (Chinese): Jia-Shiang Wu
Translation: Dharma as Water Team, Tzu Chi USA

Ho He Ho Ee-Eh-Oh  Ho He Ho Ee-Eh
Ho He Ho Ee-Eh-Oh  He Ho Ee-Eh-Oh

We all live on the same planet,
full of joy and without worries
We all live under the same sun,
using love to write out our stories

‘Cause we are all children of the Earth,
and our dream is that we’ll all come together
We are small, but we are strong,
we can all make people happy
Let us join hands, come and sing along with me

Ho He Ho Ee-Eh-Oh  Ho He Ho Ee-Eh
Ho He Ho Ee-Eh-Oh  He Ho Ee-Eh-Oh

“We are small, but we are strong!” There are so many ways we can help our planet. We can sort and clean recyclables such as paper, plastic and metal and bring them to the recycling station. We can walk, bike and take the bus or train. We can eat less meat and increase the thermostat for our air conditioning. But most of all, we can take good care of every person, animal and object around us. This is something we can all do, no matter how big or small, or young or old. When we fill the world with kindness, we can mitigate the warming of the atmosphere and gradually reduce the disasters happening in the world, so all people can be happy!

Illustrations: Martina Lo

Music, like love, can form connections between people, no matter when or where. Tzu Chi volunteers will often sing Tzu Chi songs with people to bring hope and joy in troubled times. Please scan the QR code on this page to enjoy the music video for this song.
During the Buddha’s lifetime, he often taught by example. During a journey to the kingdom of Sanchi, the Buddha and his disciples heard of an old bhiksu, an ordained monk, who was sick and alone, so they decided to visit him.

When they arrived, they found the old monk confined to his bed, sick and very weak. His body was filthy and foul-smelling.

The Buddha could not bear to see the old bhiksu suffer like this, so he instructed his disciples to immediately cook porridge and fetch water to feed and bathe the old man. The disciples, seeing how filthy the old bhiksu was, did not want to be near him. The Buddha, however, paid no attention to any of these things and bathed the bhiksu himself.

When the king of Sanchi heard this story, he was very moved by it. He asked the Buddha, “You are the most esteemed teacher of all heavenly and human beings; why did you wash the old bhiksu’s filthy body with your own hands?”

The Buddha replied to the king’s question by telling him a story from the past:

Eons ago, there was a cruel and evil king who enjoyed listening to the cries of people being brutally beaten. At the slightest infraction, this king would condemn people to severe whippings. The king went so far as to appoint the most ruthless prison guard he could find to carry out the punishments, knowing that this prison guard would see to it that the offenders suffered terribly.

At that point in time, there was a virtuous man who, though innocent, had been imprisoned and was awaiting punishment. One day, this man said to the prison guard, “I am a spiritual practitioner who upholds the precepts and abides by the rules; I was wrongfully accused.” When the prison guard heard that he was a practitioner and noticed his graceful and dignified appearance, he felt compassion for the man. Consequently, when he had to carry out the punishment, the guard forcefully raised his whip high, but

As we aid others, we are in fact also sowing blessings for ourselves.

~ Dharma Master Cheng Yen ~
brought it down gently so that the whip fell onto the practitioner’s back softly. Although the practitioner was whipped, he suffered very little.

The Buddha said, “This filthy old bhiksu was that prison guard in a past life, and the man who was wrongfully accused was me. He showed compassion toward me, and I have been hoping to repay his kindness for many lifetimes.” In spite of the prison guard’s extreme brutality in his previous life, which led him to suffer from poverty and sickness in this incarnation, the compassion he showed toward the innocent practitioner allowed him to meet and be personally attended to by the Buddha.

Every kind of cause and condition will have a corresponding effect and retribution. The law of karma is infallible. If we create negative karma, we will receive negative retribution. If we create positive karma, we will receive bountiful blessings. “Our transgressions arise from the mind; blessings are also created by the mind.” Thus, all good and evil originate from the mind. Once we deeply comprehend the law of karma, we will naturally rid ourselves of ill intentions and hold good intentions in our minds.

Blessings and wisdom can be seen as the two feet we stand on—if we care for them, we will have two strong feet that will take us wherever we want to go. If, living in this world filled with impurities, we can remain unaffected by the contentious affairs of others, regardless of the circumstances—and keep our hearts open, unobstructed, and joyous—we have attained wisdom. When we see people suffering from illness, we compassionately extend our hands to help them; thus, a compassionate heart creates blessings. If we are able to uphold our initial aspiration and persevere unwaveringly, our blessings and wisdom will naturally increase with each passing day. 🍃
In 2003 I went to Taiwan, filled with sorrow, after my mother passed away. At that time, I was offered an opportunity to volunteer in the kitchen in Tzu Chi’s Guandu campus while the Tzu Chi Humanitarian Center was being built. I still vividly remember the delicious smell coming from the kitchen. The Tzu Chi brothers and sisters prepared and served the food with love and passion. I was not a vegetarian back then, but that was the first time I realized just how tasty vegetarian food can be.

During the two-day volunteer experience, I learned how to prepare lunch for thousands of volunteers. It was there that I learned this dish: the Golden Tofu Burger. But what was more, I learned about the ripple effect that starts with delicious food. The efforts of the culinary volunteers inspire everyone to work even harder to show their appreciation. This experience gave me an unforgettable memory!

Jimmy Chiu is a long-term Tzu Chi volunteer, as is the rest of his family. He has been on the culinary team in San Dimas, California for 15 years.

Golden Tofu Burger

Ingredients (Tofu Patty) Servings: 6 Veggie Burgers

14 oz firm tofu 1 teaspoon ginger, minced 6 burger buns
5 strings of fresh green beans, minced 1 pinch white pepper 6 leaves kale
1/2 carrot, minced 1/2 teaspoon salt 1 beet, sliced thin
1 teaspoon all-purpose flour 1/4 teaspoon sesame oil 1 cup vegetable oil, for frying
1 teaspoon cornstarch

Jimmy Chiu / Photos and Translation by Steven Chiu
Directions

1. Drain and mash the tofu. Combine tofu with minced green beans and carrots.
2. Add flour, cornstarch, ginger, white pepper, salt and sesame oil to the mashed tofu and mix well.
3. Heat a pan with vegetable oil. Compress the tofu mixture into 6 balls.
4. Add the tofu balls to the hot oil. Push down on each ball lightly to flatten. Fry until golden brown on both sides.
5. Add tofu patties to burger buns and top with kale and beet. Enjoy!
On March 17, 2017, Tzu Chi Malaysia KL & Selangor held the 2017 Tzu Chi International Medical Association Forum. Medical staff representatives from twelve countries, including Malaysia, the US, Taiwan, Indonesia and the Netherlands came to participate. During the medical forum, in front of nearly 1,000 participants, Echo Chien, CEO of Tzu Chi KL & Selangor (third from the left) and Captain Ling Liong Tien, AirAisa Group Head of Safety (second from the left) signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) to further enhance cooperation.

Photo: Chen Deming

In South America, Ecuador was flooded due to heavy rains in early April 2017. Tzu Chi volunteers from seven countries and local Ecuadorian volunteers held disaster relief. On April 28, in Santa Ana, they launched a Cash-for-Relief project to clean their homes, mobilizing the survivors to clean their homes and the streets. More than 1,700 locals came out for the Cash-for-Relief project, filling the whole gymnasium. Photo provided by Tzu Chi USA

On March 13, 2017, a magnitude 5.1 earthquake struck Taikkyi Township, in Yangon, Myanmar, causing several residential buildings and temples to collapse. A couple of residents were injured. Tzu Chi volunteers went to the disaster area and cooked hot meals in the hospitals and temples. Here a volunteer comforts patients in the hospital. Photo: Wang Mianmian
On March 12, 2017, Tzu Chi volunteers in Guatemala traveled to San José Pinula to visit the care recipients and distribute supplies including rice, flour and oil in hopes of relieving the hardship of the families. Here, volunteer Sílvia comforts and keeps a care recipient company. Photo: Ye Wulizhu

On March 28, 2017, Cyclone Debbie swept through northern Australia and caused significant damage wherever it hit. The Royal Pacific Tourist Retreat and Caravan Park in Chinderah, New South Wales was severely affected. Here, Tzu Chi volunteers carry out a distribution and care for the disaster survivors. Photo: Hong Mingde

At the beginning of October 2016, the powerful Hurricane Matthew struck Haiti and caused immense casualties. Tzu Chi USA volunteers and volunteers in Haiti continued to care for the survivors. On April 22, 2017, the volunteers went to Jérémie to distribute rice donated from Taiwan, offering their well-wishes and care. The local residents received the rice joyfully. Photo provided by Tzu Chi USA
From March 10 to 12, Tzu Chi volunteers in Cambodia—together with Tzu Chi International Medical Association and Tzu Chi volunteers from Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia and others—collaborated with the Techo Youth Doctor Association to hold the first large free clinic in Cambodia. During the two-and-half days, they helped about 3,500 people. Here, pharmacist Wang Zhimin (first from the right) and other volunteers familiarize themselves with the layout of the TYDA free clinic pharmacy. Photo: Xu Zhenfu

Tzu Chi New Zealand has been interacting with the Auckland police for a long time, providing care and support for those working to maintain law and order. On March 16, 2017, Tzu Chi volunteers specifically invited a group of new recruits to the Jing Si Hall to introduce them to community groups in the area and to develop a mutual understanding for future interactions and collaboration. Here, a volunteer is guiding the police on a tour of the recycling center. Photo: Zhang Yuancong

On February 24, 2017, Tzu Chi volunteers in Beijing, China visited a senior living center in Shunyi District and had a good time with the elderly there. On the left, volunteer Zhang Yue caringly feeds a grandmother a piece of cake. Photo: Wu Gengjun
On March 11, 2017, Tzu Chi volunteers in Manchester, UK visited Abbotsford Nursing Home for their monthly get-together there. The volunteers mindfully kept the elderly company and shared moments of fun and joy. Here, Brother Lin Jie (left) and other volunteers interact closely with the elderly.

Photo: Wang Suzhen

Currently, among the 25,000 Syrian refugees in Canada, more than half are supported by the Canadian government. Still, life is difficult in a foreign country. On March 24, 2017, Tzu Chi volunteers in Toronto collaborated with local social welfare agencies to distribute supplies including cooking oil and chickpeas to the refugee families. They hoped to reduce the families’ living expenses and let these Syrians feel a sense of familial care and warmth in a foreign country.

At right, volunteer Tang Jiabin interacts with the refugees.

Photo: Zheng Weiyuan

On February 24, 2017, Tzu Chi volunteers in Jordan went to Zaatari, Mafraq to distribute daily necessities and visit Syrian refugees as well as the local care recipients, the nomadic Bedouins. The volunteers brought supplies including rice, sugar, oil, chickpeas, tea bags and secondhand clothes, along with blessings for everyone.

Here on the right, Iraqi doctor Hala, who is also a refugee herself, is providing free clinic services for the refugees and care recipients.

Photo provided by Tzu Chi Jordan
I still remember the first day I met Sister Debbie Chen. It was my second visit to the Tzu Chi office in New Jersey and I was attending the Buddha Bathing Ceremony. I was enjoying the festivities and trying out the different types of vegetarian goodies when I first met a short, smiling Asian aunty with glasses. I remembered the smile on her face as she came over to greet us young volunteers. Right away, she started to chatter at me in Chinese, even though we had never met before. I managed to somehow communicate that my Mandarin is not so great and I remembered her bringing me in close and saying, “Learn more Mandarin.” She gave me a squeeze and told me to come to the office more often, just like a parent would do to her child. It was over a year before I found out that she was the executive director for the Tzu Chi Mid-Atlantic Region. In a way, I still think of her as my Tzu Chi “mom.” If not for her, I and many others would never have embarked on this journey in Tzu Chi, and we would never have met our lifelong sisters and brothers.

That was in 2001. 16 years later, I had the opportunity to sit down with Sister Debbie and gain a much deeper understanding of her story. She spoke of the great transformation she had undergone because of her relationship with Master Cheng Yen. In fact, through her, many people have been able to do the same, becoming inspired to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of others. Just as Master Cheng Yen has paved a path for Buddhist practitioners to
put compassion into action, Sister Debbie paved a path for her Chinese community to practice Buddhism in their adopted country. Each created a lasting imprint on all the lives of all the people they connected with.

It all started when Debbie Chen moved to New Jersey with her family. At that time, her primary job was “housewife.” She had her daily routine, which would include sports at the country club, lunch and shopping with friends, before going home again to take care of her two daughters, Jean and Anne, and her son Willis. It was a comfortable life, but she never felt like she belonged. This was America, with a different culture and a different language. Sister Debbie struggled to find her purpose here—something was missing.

Through an acquaintance, Sister Debbie became involved with Tzu Chi in New York. She didn’t know much about Tzu Chi, only that it was a volunteer group. It was with a very simple heart that the New Jersey Tzu Chi family began to grow. At first, Sister Debbie simply wanted to create a place where the Asian community could get together to volunteer and give back to the local area. She asked Tzu Chi volunteers to come to her home and hosted social gatherings for friends and acquaintances. Soon her house filled up. She invited people over to her house just to get to know one another, to share stories and to learn more about Tzu Chi. Whether they stayed and volunteered with Tzu Chi or not, she welcomed them and left her home unlocked if they wanted to come and stay, or leave and come again later. She left the choice up to the individual and their affinity.

Before she realized it, there were 400 or so volunteers going in and out of her home on a weekly basis, organizing service projects or getting together to share their experiences. Debbie knew at that moment that this simple group she had created was growing quickly. They needed a more official place to gather, as her home was no longer big enough to accommodate everyone. So, the journey to find a new home away from home for the Mid-Atlantic Tzu Chi volunteers began. What at first was just a simple spark had transformed into an intense flame, lighting the way to a permanent home for Tzu Chi Foundation’s Mid-Atlantic Region. Thanks to her efforts, a bridge was built for us, between young and old, American and Chinese. All people from all walks of life have the chance to walk through these doors and unlock the potential in their hearts.

Like any dream we want to accomplish, it was not always smooth sailing. There are always obstacles. When Tzu Chi started in New Jersey, Sister Debbie was not very confident with introducing the Buddhist idea of compassion in action to people. Unlike other Buddhist organizations, Tzu Chi had no Dharma Masters based locally, so she had doubts as to whether people could believe in this Buddhist organization.
However, Master Cheng Yen reminded her to believe in the power that lay disciples can have when interacting with others, to believe in her own capabilities, and to remember that nothing could stop her if she set her heart and mind to her goals. Every person has unlimited potential; if we have the will, things will come to fruition.

With that reminder, Sister Debbie persevered whenever obstacles blocked her way, always navigating around them. Her goal was clear, and she never gave up.

As Tzu Chi in New Jersey continued to grow, Sister Debbie moved ahead on her own spiritual journey. She traveled back to Taiwan to meet Master Cheng Yen, cementing this lifelong path she would walk on. She was humbled and inspired by Master’s love and patience and her ability to help her disciples fulfill their dreams. Thus, when Tzu Chi Mid-Atlantic volunteers first went to the Dominican Republic in 1998 to provide relief to those devastated by Hurricane Georges, Sister Debbie expressed to Master Cheng Yen her wish to go to Central America, to bring Tzu Chi’s spirit and encourage volunteers there to join in this cycle of love and giving. But her wish was not to be fulfilled at that time.

For many years, Sister Debbie was dedicated to leading the Mid-Atlantic region. In 2016, when Sister Debbie Chen finally stepped down as the Mid-Atlantic Executive Director, she told Master Cheng Yen that now she could finally take a break. This work had gone on for almost two decades; wouldn’t it be natural to say, “My job is done, so let me retire”? But life does not retire. Life goes on, so why not reach back and rediscover a forgotten dream once held? Why not begin a new journey, making the most of our time? Master remembered and reminded Sister Debbie of the aspiration she expressed more than a decade ago and assigned her the new task of helping Tzu Chi’s work in Central and South America.

When she went to Central America, Sister Debbie was heartbroken by the economic hardship and constant cycle of suffering she witnessed. She wanted to help but didn’t know where to start. She wanted to tell Master she couldn’t do it, but just when she was about to do so, she listened to one of Master’s morning lectures. Master’s words awakened something in her; once again, her inner calling was ignited. This spark gave her a new sense of purpose, and it began another chapter of
transformation in her life.

This year, 16 years after I first met her, Sister Debbie did not attend the Buddha Bathing Ceremony at the Mid-Atlantic Region office. Instead, she celebrated the occasion with Tzu Chi volunteers in Haiti as they continued to care for this long-suffering nation. Sister Debbie believes in affinities and the connections between people, and so as she crisscrosses Central and South America on her volunteer travels, she has formed many connections and created many new affinities. This is all the result of putting her compassion into action.

Through Sister Debbie’s story, I can see the many ways we can choose to give ourselves empowerment and the many doorways we can choose to open for ourselves. Wherever we are in our life right now, it is our connection with the people we encounter and the lively essays we write together that keep transforming our world. It is always up to us to make a change within ourselves, to honor who we are as individuals, to remember our dreams and goals and then go for them! Sister Debbie has undergone yet another transformation from being the Mid-Atlantic Region executive director to being a Tzu Chi “mom” all over Central America, helping to set up Tzu Chi families everywhere she goes. As she travels between New Jersey, Central America, and Taiwan, Sister Debbie is always connecting with others, forming bridges, and opening doorways for different people from all walks of life to enter and discover the joy in giving.

Diana Kwok is an elementary school teacher in Rahway, New Jersey and a long-time Tzu Chi volunteer. As a Rutgers University Tzu Chi Collegiate Association alumna, she is a mentor for the local Tzu Chi collegiate and high school chapters.
Building a Family with Every Person

Know your blessings, cherish them, and sow more blessings.

~ Dharma Master Cheng Yen ~

When you first meet Jennifer An, you will see a petite lady with a big smile on her face. And you will certainly receive a warm and friendly greeting as she leads you to visit a nursing home or a care recipient. You might not suspect that she is the current head of the Charity Mission of Tzu Chi USA Southern Region, working in nursing homes, women’s centers, homeless shelters, the local food bank, and even disaster areas far from where she lives. For the past 17 years, Jennifer has remained unwavering as she dedicates her life to helping others through her charity work with Tzu Chi, always with the goal of bringing people together to walk the Bodhisattva Path side by side.

1977 was a fateful year for Jennifer. She was 7 months pregnant when her husband fled their home country of Vietnam to escape the brutal communist rule there. Her husband feared that he was in danger, so it was decided that he would leave the country first. Even though her first son was about to be born, Jennifer and her husband were forced to separate for their own safety. This period of separation lasted 6 years. It was not until 1984 that the family was again reunited in

Jennifer sets up a display of flowers during a nursing home event. Photo: Michelle Yi
the United States and Jennifer’s son was finally able to meet his father for the first time.

Jennifer had gained a deep understanding of the impermanence of life and the importance of cherishing the people around her, having undergone difficult circumstances herself. For this reason, when the tragic 921 Earthquake occurred in Taiwan, Jennifer decided to donate to Tzu Chi’s disaster relief efforts and was later sent a copy of the Tzu Chi USA Journal. Reading the journal planted a seed in her. Later, after her son graduated from college, Jennifer joined Tzu Chi.

Having been separated from her friends and family before, Jennifer’s journey with Tzu Chi has been one of building a new family with everyone she meets. She treats everyone with a sense of compassion that extends far beyond her own family and friends to those she does not know at all. Jennifer always says that she tries to treat others with love and compassion, because by treating others this way, everyone becomes family.

Jennifer once shared the story of how she met a 30-year-old woman who had depression and was contemplating suicide. She visited the woman 12 days in a row to encourage and help her, bringing her printouts of Master Cheng Yen’s teachings. Once the woman was willing to leave her home, Jennifer brought her along to visit other care recipients to see the suffering of others. With Jennifer’s perseverance and sincerity and the experience of witnessing others’ suffering, the woman was able to recognize and cherish her own blessings. In the end, she was able to recover and start a new life. Helping people to find that feeling of being home is how Jennifer has built her Tzu Chi family.

Over the years, Jennifer has recruited over 130 Tzu Chi members and volunteers. Her enthusiasm and commitment lead her to share Tzu Chi with every person she meets. While others might sleep or watch movies on an airplane, Jennifer An is talking about Tzu Chi and sharing Master’s teachings on love and compassion. One person who Jennifer An met on a flight later joined Tzu Chi and became a regular donor.

Jennifer is also committed to bringing members of the Houston Vietnamese community into Tzu Chi. She invites fellow Vietnamese immigrants to her home for tea to share stories and teachings with them and encourage them to get involved in charity work. In 2016, when Baton Rouge suffered severe flood damage, Jennifer contacted the community leaders in the
Baton Rouge Vietnamese community—including Dharma Masters in Buddhist temples and pastors in the local churches—to organize disaster relief distributions for the local residents. In early 2017, she again went to Baton Rouge to hold a gathering for the local Vietnamese volunteers who became inspired during the 2016 flood relief efforts. These are some of the ways Jennifer is able to bring people together.

In addition to being a place where Jennifer has built a new family, Tzu Chi has also provided Jennifer with a place for her to heal from the countless losses she has experienced. Jennifer’s mother passed away in Thailand about a month after Jennifer came to the U.S. Her father passed away a few years ago. She still regrets that when her parents were alive, she was either away or very busy and did not have the chance to do many things for them. Now, during her weekly visits to the local nursing home, she is able to spend time with and care for the elderly. When she speaks to them, they tell her that they are lonely and that their children are not able to visit them often. Realizing that her own parents must have felt the same in their old age, she was even more motivated to put her compassion into action. She is very grateful to the nursing home residents for the chance to give them the same love she would have given to her parents.

Though Jennifer has no family members in Taiwan, she returns to the Jing Si Abode in Hualien almost every year and thinks of the Abode as her family home. She says, “Master is like my mother; she has given me so much Dharma and had helped my wisdom-life grow.”

Jennifer guides a senior resident to his seat. Photo: Michelle Yi

Every time she returns, she feels like she has gone back to visit her parents and family members and is filled with peace and gratitude. In Jennifer’s life, you can clearly see the life of a Bodhisattva. By going out into the world and helping others, it is in fact she herself who gets to experience great joy and well-being. By helping others to find their own spiritual home, Jennifer has also built a family for herself, one filled with the love and care of fellow Bodhisattvas. With Master Cheng Yen’s teachings, time and time again, Jennifer has been able to turn life’s grief and hardship into profound sources of peace and joy. This is what it means to be a member of the Tzu Chi family.

Pen-chi Liu and her husband are both long-term Tzu Chi volunteers in Houston. She is especially active as a documentation and translation volunteer.
Benefiting others is wondrous Dharma
Q: “What is wondrous Dharma?”
A: “Words which people are willing to accept and follow are Wondrous Dharma. If you only talk about the sutras or what the Buddha said in the past, and talk in a deep and abstruse way, then people will not understand. Even if they understand, they will not be able to put what you say into practice. However, if you can talk about how you yourself have changed, people will think, ‘I want to achieve that too!’ Thus, if your words inspire people to transform themselves, then you are speaking the Dharma.”

Pure giving
Q: “What is true giving?”
A: “When we donate money, it should be for the sake of doing a good deed. One does not necessarily have to contribute a lot for it to be considered charity; it should be done according to one’s capability. To give things away without feeling distressed or afflicted is true charitable giving. We need to give with equanimity. Giving is not just about donating tangible goods; we must also let go of our mind’s afflictions.

“After performing acts of charity, people sometimes have afflictions. One kind of affliction comes from not being able to truly let go, in which they keep worrying about whether they gave too much. Another is due to the fear that others will not recognize the good deed that they have done; they do it because they want praise. Neither of these constitutes true giving. If, after performing charity, we let afflictions accumulate in our minds, then the act of giving is not pure. After giving charitably, we must also let go of our afflictions. Only when we feel peaceful and at ease are we exhibiting true giving.”

True understanding of impermanence
Q: “Since we don’t know if there will be a tomorrow, why do we need to work hard today?”
A: “Our understanding of impermanence should not make us pessimistic, but should rather make us more engaged! Because of the impermanence of life, we must actively seize every moment. We must not create bad karma; instead, we should make good use of our time to do things in earnest.”

Excerpted from Infinite Teachings, Infinite Meanings by Shiib Cheng Yen (Jing Si Publications, 2015). For more information, please visit any Jing Si Books & Cafe (directory on pages 62-64) or go to jingsi.us.tzuchi.org.
As we exited the terminal, a Tzu Chi brother was already waiting outside. Thanks to our uniforms, we recognized each other right away, and we quickly got into the pickup van. Looking out through the window with our eyes wide open, we were surprised at how quiet the city was. We were told it was because of Easter, a religious holiday celebrated by most residents here. After a short ride, we arrived at OECC, a Taiwanese company that provides a headquarters for the Tzu Chi team in Port-au-Prince. We would be staying there in preparation for the upcoming distributions. The gate in front of us was high and made of steel. After some magic of signaling which was not obvious to outsiders, someone came to open the gate and let us in. After we drove in, the gate quickly closed behind us.

We had arrived in Port-au-Prince on a Sunday afternoon. The plane stopped at a distance from the terminal, and since there was no jet bridge or air bus, we carried our luggage with us, walking to the terminal, which looked mostly like a bus station. For us Bostonians, the damp and heat felt nice at first but soon became overwhelming. And it was not even their hottest season yet! But soon after, the summer heat was replaced by the air-conditioned comfort of the OECC lounge, where other Tzu Chi sisters and brothers from the U.S. were already waiting for us. After a pleasant introduction and some nice snacks, dinner was served. Our worry that we would only be able to eat instant noodles here was replaced by amazement at the authentic Asian vegetarian food prepared by local chefs.

When you view the world from a different perspective, the world becomes vast and wide. Try shifting your perspective in everything you do, and all will be light and easy.

~ Dharma Master Cheng Yen ~
During our conversation, we learned that one of the volunteers, Brother James Chen, had been one of the first Tzu Chi volunteers supporting the work here, and that this was his 65th trip to Haiti. Gentle, humorous and friendly, he felt like a grandfather to us. At the same time, just like a grandfather watching out for his grandchildren, he told us scary stories about what had happened in the past in order to remind us of the safety issues. Even when he tried to be very serious, we could still feel the warmth and care emanating from him.

The next day, one group left for Jérémie around 180 miles west of Port-au-Prince to prepare for the upcoming rice distributions there, while the rest of us stayed two more days at Port-au-Prince to prepare for the distribution in Les Cayes, another town that had suffered extensive damage during Hurricane Matthew last year. During the wait, we got the chance to visit the three schools that Tzu Chi built for a congregation of Catholic nuns after the 2010 earthquake.

The pleasant lifestyle at OECC and the sense of security provided by its high walls were in sharp contrast to the living conditions of the Haitian majority. Lottery booths and makeshift vendor stands lined the more crowded streets. We came to understand the depth of the economic stagnation in Haiti. Nonetheless, a sense of dignity was apparent in people’s faces, in the way they dressed, and in the way they walked.

On the fourth day, we finally left for Les Cayes, 125 miles to the west. This was where our first distribution would take place. In contrast to the bustling streets in the city, there was little infrastructure in the rural areas. The landscape was a clash of construction and destruction. Long stretches of roads were unpaved, and along the roads were dilapidated walls plastered with religious verses, advertisements, and stencils encouraging people to plant Moringa trees in an
attempt to counter malnutrition. The polyester tarps from past international aid efforts still constituted the only protection against the natural elements in many places, and where reconstruction was complete, the silver tin roofs glittered in the sun like gems scattered across mountain ridges.

The first distribution was carried out the next day in an agriculture center in Les Cayes. In the center, there was a huge open space to dry grain, surrounded by machines that had been destroyed by the hurricane last year. Hundreds of people lined up outside the gate in the morning with vouchers in hand. We had been told that local people do not know how to line up, but the nearly 1,000 people waiting were lined up in twelve lines, as square as a tofu cube. The only time there was some turmoil was when volunteers moved people with disabilities and the elderly to the front, which was not at first understood by the others. We learned our lesson; in the following distributions, we invited these people to the front at the beginning of the distribution. We could tell that these values of respect were shared despite our differences in nationality and language.

The following distributions were held in Jérémie, a poverty stricken region further north that has rarely been reached by relief efforts in the past. We traveled in a fleet with two rice trucks and four cars, with local police in the front and UN troops in the rear. While following one of the rice trucks, we could almost see the road sink under the 2,000 bags of rice in it. It took us twelve hours to travel a distance that would usually be a four-hour drive, which gave us plenty of time to witness the scenery as we moved deeper into the country. While the influx of foreign aid comes with good intentions and temporary benefit, for the locals, unmet needs and constant compromises for the sake of survival are facts of life. Nonetheless, as one of our trucks got stuck in the mud, the people from the surrounding villages quickly came out to help us the best they could.

The distribution in Jérémie took place in the local police station. There, we joined the other Tzu Chi volunteers from the U.S. and a group of local volunteers. Most of them were from our local partner groups, and they had been encouraged to help in the distribution effort by the promise of an extra bag of rice. We held a volunteer training the day before the first distribution, during which our volunteers used a simple example to explain the principle of the Three Spheres of Emptiness: We can only feel the joy of giving if the receiver

Local residents line up in the open space in an agriculture center of Les Cayes waiting for the rice to be unloaded. Photo: Keziah Jean
accepts the gift. Therefore, we must be grateful to the recipient for giving us the opportunity to give. We could not tell if they fully understood the message after two rounds of translation, but we noticed how one of the local volunteers would later nod his head every time when he was giving a bag of rice to a recipient. Hopefully the recipient could feel the love and respect embedded in his gesture.

At some point, the long rides on winding roads, the littered street corners, and the shuffling feet underneath a load of daily necessities started to invoke a familiar sense of home and belonging, which only grew stronger as time went on. Although Haiti is much different from our childhood home of northeastern China, we could recognize the same traumas of a deteriorating economy: the violence and fear cloaked in the night, the sense of desperation and the drive for self-preservation. We also recognized the wonder in the eyes of the children at the sight of foreigners, the struggles of families on unknown roads paved with both hope and despair, as well as the sustaining moments of joy and kinship.

The Haiti we saw is a society in transition, where, as is true everywhere in the world, the only constancy is change. From constant change stems human resilience. This is the point that every path of faith traces back to; this is where every trickle of hope spawns and flows.

To us, this sense of faith we witnessed resonated with our experience of the dynamics inside our group. At first sight, everything looks very beautiful. As we take a step closer, we discover that we are all just ordinary people with our own way of understanding and doing things, and that there is a lot of room for the group to improve. However, as we kept looking even closer, did we again find beauty? Yes, we did.

We saw it when a fellow volunteer tried his best to remind us in a friendly way of the Master’s teachings, teachings we had all heard before but had found difficult to apply. We saw it in how our roommate agreed without complaint to sleep in a bed where she had found the body of a dead cockroach. And we saw it in the way people took care of us, each in the best way that they could. We saw this beauty before the distributions, when we prayed together that the rain would stop so it would be easier for people traveling from far away in the countryside. We saw it when the Tzu Chi sisters performed sign language to entertain and calm the people waiting outside of the distribution sites. We saw it in the dance steps we took together with the locals. We saw it when our sisters jumped onto the truck to carry the rice bags. And we saw it in the smiles of the local volunteers when they shared their feelings on the last day, although we were not able to understand their words.

For both Hua Yang and Jing Wei Pan, this trip to Haiti was their first experience in international relief work. Ordinarily, they are active in local charity events and study groups with Tzu Chi in Boston.
When people read this quote, they may think that it’s a bit strong. “What do I have to repent for?” However, have you thought of the many occasions in life when you think “If only I would have…?” These thoughts are often referred to as regrets. In order to avoid living a life filled with regrets, we must work diligently to explore our afflictions. It is my firm belief that by making conscious and willful efforts, we will reach a state where we do not have anything to repent for, and where we will instead be able to celebrate a fulfilling life.

Learn, for example, from my experiences. Early spring 2005: I was a young, energetic, dedicated, and loyal employee for a worldwide shipping company. “Service” was the goal and nothing else! It was that spring when I received a phone call from my nephew who lives in Mexico. He told me that his mother, my sister, had uncontrolled diabetes. Busy as I was, I expressed to him that I was sad to hear that my sister was experiencing such impactful and painful health problems. At only 42 years old, my sister had already nearly lost her eyesight, had limited ability to walk, and many of her organs were failing. My nephew called me no less than seven times that spring to tell me about the frail state of my sister’s health. I was caring enough to listen, but too busy to act. The last call came in on a Friday night. My nephew informed me that my sister was back in the hospital, and that she might not make it out alive. I will never forget the words I uttered so
lightly: “She will be fine—call me back when she recovers.” Five hours later, my nephew did call back. He informed me that my sister had passed away. I, her brother of choice, had been nowhere near to hold her hand and accompany her into her new life!

My friends, regrets can be both large and small, and they come at all times of one’s life. However, some things that we come to regret could have been prevented. That night, I had every opportunity to leave my work and board a plane to Mexico (I was even working at an airport!). My regret is not having seen my sister for an entire year before she passed away. My regret is not having been able to say goodbye. I should have acted promptly and decisively. I should have taken human needs as my priority and acted on the side of compassion.

Eighteen years of a career in the corporate world, experiencing great success, always seeking to be better and reach new goals, left me feeling empty. Growing the corporate coffers provided a superficial sense of satisfaction, but at the core, I found myself void. I now understand that this was because I made no true difference. I did nothing to support humankind. Moreover, working nights for those eighteen years, I missed out on experiencing birthdays, anniversaries, births, deaths, and other special moments with my family.

I have now finally found a new purpose in life: service to others. I speak of actions for the betterment of humanity and not just for ourselves. One way to accomplish this is through volunteering in support of a greater cause, in support of something bigger than ourselves, something to benefit more than just ourselves!

Thus, in the words of Master Cheng Yen: “Taking action is better than thinking and talking about it.”

Life is short. Cherish each day, use your time wisely, and choose to make a difference to and for the world. By doing this, surprisingly, you will find the world making a difference in you.

Happy hunting for life!

With much love, respect and consideration.

Ramon Velasco is the principal of Jones Elementary School in San Bernardino. He is an active volunteer in Tzu Chi’s mobile food pantry program in Southern California.
On January 16, Tzu Chi celebrated the second International Ethical Eating Day. The event encourages individuals to commit to a local, plant-based diet for the entire day. This past year, over 300,000 people made such a commitment.

I am one of those who have made that pledge. You may ask, what does it mean to eat ethically? For me, eating ethically is a simple concept: it means that I consider the moral, environmental, and ethical implications of the foods that I choose to eat. For example, when I order food at a restaurant, I think about how the food is prepared. I ask questions about where the food comes from and what conditions it was grown in. I consider the moral quandaries of eating meat as well as the environmental impacts of how my food came from farm to table.

Therefore, I personally eat ethically by adopting a vegetarian diet. I began five years ago, after someone dear to me passed away, in accordance with Buddhist tradition. I have continued with vegetarianism ever since, motivated not necessarily by religious faith, but rather by health and environmental concern.

Yet ethical eating does not necessarily mean vegetarianism; ethical eating comes in many forms. It is purchasing cage-free eggs to recognize the plight of chickens living in factory farms. It is avoiding beef, whose production generates the most carbon emissions among all types of meat. It is participating in the Meatless Mondays movement.

That is its inherent beauty: ethical eating allows for the flexibility to freely define the ethical decision-making that drives their dietary choices and inspires dialogue with others as to what that definition may be and how those values manifest themselves. Most importantly, it nurtures a sense of compassion and care for others and can address the larger social issues in our world.

It is time to adopt a new approach to plant-based diets. Ethical eating presents an approach that respects individual values and experiences while inspiring others to do the same.

Steven Chen recently graduated from University of Maryland with a degree in Global Health. He is an active Tzu Chi volunteer and has facilitated workshops exploring service, faith, and philanthropy around the Washington, DC area.

There exists a distance between knowledge and action. In addition to knowing principles, one must realize them by taking action.

~ Dharma Master Cheng Yen ~

Steven Chen

Reframing Vegetarianism

Steve shares an anecdote to Tzu Ching members at the University of Maryland, College Park. Photo: Jamie Matthews
As an eager freshman opening a new chapter of my life, I was excited to discover what lay in store for me in the uncharted territory that was high school. Constantly mingling with peers who thoroughly enjoyed and excelled at their extracurricular activities—ranging from performing in theaters and orchestras to playing on sports teams—had me quickly realizing that I, too, wanted to find an activity that could bring me the same sense of fulfillment that my peers have experienced. I dedicated myself to Tzu Chi High School Group in hopes of discovering this experience.

Throughout freshman year, I attended all kinds of Tzu Chi volunteer events—distributing food at food banks, weeding state parks, visiting nursing homes, etc.—and walked out of them feeling disappointed. No matter how hard I searched for that “ah-ha!” moment, one that signified finding the same fulfilling experience as my peers, I always came up empty-handed. I constantly wondered, “What did I gain from spending my time at these events?” When my answer was always, “Nothing,” my sense of frustration with my lack of progress intensified, and I grew increasingly restless and reluctant to attend Tzu Chi events.

Then, I met Eliane.

She was wearing a simple pastel pink cardigan on the day I saw her at one of our usual nursing home visits. Amid the joyful cheers and singing of the seniors enjoying the students’ performances, she sat still in her wheelchair with a reserved smile on her face. Her strange behavior intrigued me, but I hesitated to approach her, for that kind of action was far out of my comfort zone. As the event went on, however, I found myself unable to turn away from her. With her silvery white hair constantly catching the light of the afternoon sun and her mysterious hesitation to let loose with the crowd, I was inevitably drawn in.

During one of the students’ performances, I knelt beside her wheelchair and made some small talk with her.

“It’s nice to meet you, Natlie,” the gracefully-aged lady said in a thick European accent after my introduction. “My name is Eliane. I’m really glad you and your friends are here today.”

I couldn’t quite put a finger on it just then, but I knew it was the beginnings of a feeling I would always treasure.

Seeing her reserved smile break out into a genuine, bright grin while we discussed trivial matters like the weather and other fun activities we had done...
that day, I felt something new and strange stir within me; I couldn't quite put a finger on it just then, but I knew it was the beginnings of a feeling I would always treasure.

Breaking the silence that had settled between us after a while, Eliane began to tell me about her journey through life. Her husband was an American soldier deployed in France when they met and fell in love, much to her family’s chagrin. She lost all contact with her family in France once she immigrated to America with her husband in 1964 and hasn’t seen nor spoken to them since. Recently, her husband passed away, leaving her alone in a nursing home with only occasional visits from her children and grandchildren who all lived out of state.

Although speaking of her husband’s recent passing dimmed the lights in her eyes, her smile never faltered. She spoke of her three children—all happily married and with steady careers—with great pride, not forgetting to mention a single detail about their appearance and accomplishments. The immense motherly love she had for them both touched and wrenched at my heart. The lack of constant contact with her beloved children and recent loss of her significant other didn’t stop her from enjoying every moment of her day. Despite all her struggles, her spirit was still simmering with life.

By the time our conversation came to a comfortable lull, I finally mustered up the courage to try something that had occurred to me as soon as I heard her heavy accent, one that I often heard from my French teacher at school.

I said with a shy smile, “Bonjour, je m’appelle Natlie. J’ai quinze ans maintenant.” (Hello, my
The light in her eyes blazed as she turned to me in astonishment and asked, “Vous pouvez parler en français?” (You can speak in French?)

Surprised by her strong reaction, I stuttered out, “O-oui? Mais seulement un peu.” (Yes? But just a little.)

As if a bright, burning fire had been lit in her spirit after hearing those words, she took off in rapid-fire French that my high-school-French-2-level mind couldn’t catch a single word of. Her excitement bubbled up and exploded in spontaneous gestures of joy as she spoke, making me smile in pure delight despite my inability to understand anything she said.

She turned to me with an expectant look once she finished speaking, but I could only offer her an embarrassed laugh. She chuckled and said, “I guess you couldn’t understand all that. I was just saying how no one has spoken to me in French for years. I don’t think you know just how happy I was to hear those words.”

Upon seeing her elation over such a simple act that really anyone could’ve done, I pulled out my phone and played one of my favorite French songs, “La Vie en rose,” for her. Once Édith Piaf’s voice reached Eliane’s ears, tears spilled from her eyes as she sang along to one of the nation’s most iconic songs. As she held my hand and thanked me for bringing back fond memories, the strange, stirring emotion I felt earlier that day blossomed into a recognizable sensation.

**Fulfillment.**

It was a warm sensation that started from my heart and spread to the farthest reaches of my body. From the tips of my fingers to the bottom of my toes, I was filled with a sense of satisfaction and pride in my unexpected accomplishment. I had previously been so fixated on attaining my goal that I ended up blinding myself to it even though what I was looking for—that irreplaceable feeling of complete contentment with one’s actions—was right in front of me all along. The short time I spent with Eliane that day opened my eyes to the value of being mindful—to always be in the present moment instead of burying my head in the future.

Becoming more mindful has changed the way I perceive my experiences. Instead of constantly asking myself, “What did I gain from spending my time here?” at volunteer events, I now find myself asking, “What could I have done better to help these people?” This change in mindset allows me to learn the most from all my experiences and feel that desired sense of fulfillment more often. I now find myself looking forward to gleaning a bit of knowledge from every passing moment and enriching each line, page, and chapter of the book of my life.

Natlie Lee is a high school graduate from San Ramon, California, active in Tzu Chi’s high school volunteer group. This fall, she will go to UC Berkeley. She loves connecting with others through music.
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In 1966, Dharma Master Cheng Yen founded the Tzu Chi Merit Association in Hualien with the support of thirty housewives who each put aside 50 Taiwanese cents (around 2 US 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 supporters 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. With time, 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 activities such as emergency disaster relief, homeless services, school support programs, college scholarships, income tax reporting assistance, holiday care packs, free and low-cost medical clinics and outreaches, cancer support groups, community education classes, and the 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 major disasters such as 9/11, Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy as well as wildfires, floods and tornadoes. Internationally, volunteers have provided relief in earthquakes and other disasters in Haiti, Japan, Nepal, Ecuador and many other countries.

In recent years, Tzu Chi’s charitable work has been increasingly recognized by the global community. In 2010, Tzu Chi was granted special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and in 2013, Tzu Chi was honored as a White House Champion of Change. Dharma Master Cheng Yen has been 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 (2011), and honored with the Rotary International Award of Honor (2014).
Bodhisattvas are not idols made of wood; real Bodhisattvas are people who eat, talk, work and relieve suffering in times of need.

~ Dharma Master Cheng Yen ~