

A Conversation on Inspiring Altruism

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Monday, 24 September 2012 15:50



[[Master's Teachings](#)]

When a renowned writer in Taiwan visited Dharma Master Cheng Yen, he marveled that besides alleviating people's suffering, Tzu Chi has inspired altruism in many, many people in Taiwan, so that they're willing to work together to help others. Because of this, Tzu Chi has been able to help people in over 70 countries around the world. He sought to better understand how Tzu Chi has been able to do this.

The Master told him:

"Indeed, in Taiwan, there are many good people with a great deal of love and kindness. Actually, every human being is capable of this love and goodness. From the Buddhist perspective, human beings' true nature is full of love and goodness; it is just that people have not brought these forth. As long as people look within and discover that they have this capacity for love in their hearts, then it is like tapping into a wellspring. They will be able to do so much good. In Taiwan, many people have experienced this. While Taiwan is quite small, it is densely populated, so with everyone living close together, people interact a lot with each other and can inspire one another. This is how, here in Taiwan, it has been possible to get many people inspired to join the cause of doing good in a relatively short period of time. But every human being has such a capacity for love and goodness."

The Master went on to illustrate this by telling the visiting author about the diverse background of Tzu Chi volunteers. Some are wealthy entrepreneurs while others are low-income people who receive Tzu Chi's financial aid:



"Everyone has the Buddha nature, everyone has love in their hearts. This is inherent in everyone. It is just that everyone's external circumstances are different, due to their differing backgrounds and financial situations.

There are many people who are rich both spiritually and materially. Externally, they are wealthy. Internally, they are also very wealthy. In Tzu Chi, there are many people like this. For example, many entrepreneurs or heads of corporations are involved in Tzu Chi. They don't just donate money. They get involved personally in the work. And when they get involved they are equal to everyone else in the organization. They wouldn't expect people to give them preferential treatment just because they are wealthy and have made large donations. When they get involved, they are very humble. When they lead others in their team, they don't do it by giving orders or telling people what to do. They do it by setting an example. They take on responsibilities and do the work themselves to show people the way to do things. I call these

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people 'the rich among the rich' because they are so rich in heart. They may have a lot of material wealth, but what is most precious is the way they are willing to personally get involved, rolling up their sleeves to do the work themselves along with everyone else."

The Master then explained about people of other circumstances:

"But there are many people who are experiencing suffering. How do we go about helping these people? For some of them, they aren't lacking in money, clothing, or food—what they lack is care from others. They are alone in the world, so what they need is people who can give them care. In Tzu Chi, kind-hearted people from different walks of life will come together, and as a team, they can go to care for those who have no one. Therefore, in Tzu Chi, we not only help the impoverished but care for people who don't lack the basic necessities but who are all alone in the world and need care.

However, no matter how much care we give them, it can never really be enough. So, what we do is to encourage these people to step outside their homes and come with us on our service trips. We give them encouragement and assure them that they are not too old or unhealthy to contribute. 'You still have so much to offer and you can help people,' we tell them. Many of them then join us in our Tzu Chi activities. As they come along with us on visits to the poor or the sick, they see a lot of things for themselves—they see that there are other people who are older than them, whose illnesses are even more severe than theirs, or whose circumstances are even more unfortunate. They begin to realize that they can do something for others, and they have greater faith and belief that they can actually make a difference. So, more and more, they will get involved in Tzu Chi, eventually becoming Tzu Chi volunteers themselves. Such people started out needing love, but not only have they received love but they realize that they have enough love to give others as well. This is because the love in their hearts has been inspired and they discover in themselves the capacity to give and help others. So, being loved, they can also love others."



The Master then spoke about people whose life conditions are difficult:

"Then there are those who are sick, handicapped, or poor. We need to offer these people our aid. But besides providing material or financial aid, we also give them care and love.

We also try to help them to have a heartwarming and harmonious family. Just yesterday, a volunteer shared a story. Because this is the time of the Dragon Boat Festival, as per tradition, our volunteers have made vegetarian zongzi (rice dumplings) for the festival to give as gifts to all the families under Tzu Chi's care. We have also taken these to orphanages, retirement homes, and other institutions that Tzu Chi volunteers often visit. Among these are institutions run by Catholic nuns or priests. We visited them all the same, with an inclusive heart that doesn't differentiate between religions. We brought the gift of zongzi. One Catholic nun told our volunteers that she was really happy to see us. Our volunteer said, 'Yes, we always come

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around the time of the Dragon Boat Festival to bring you zongzi.' The Catholic nun replied, 'Yes, you do, but that isn't why we are happy. We are very grateful for the zongzi, but we are happy to see you. I also want to let you know that the family that you were taking care of is now doing very well.'

This was a Catholic family that the nuns had been giving spiritual support to. Tzu Chi's connection with the family started when the head of the family suffered a stroke several years ago and was admitted to our Tzu Chi hospital. Our social worker discovered this man could not pay his medical bills and his family also needed financial aid to make ends meet. Tzu Chi volunteers visited his house to learn more about his situation. They found out that his wife had some degree of mental impairment, so keeping the house tidy and well-ordered was a bit of a challenge for her. They also learned that he had children who were of school age. Tzu Chi began helping this family. Besides providing material aid, they also regularly visited the wife and children to offer them care. Meanwhile, the man was in the hospital and Tzu Chi volunteers continually gave him support and encouragement, reminding him that he still had a lot to live for and so much to give to his family. For quite a period of time, Tzu Chi volunteers cared for this family—both the father in the hospital and the family at home."

The Master continued:

"Gradually, the man recovered well enough to return home, and Tzu Chi volunteers continued to visit and care for the family. For instance, our volunteers discovered that the children were having difficulties with their studies since neither parent could help them with their schoolwork or teach them. Though the father couldn't give his children tangible help, the volunteers knew that if the children had a closer relationship with their father, they would have much needed moral support. So, the volunteers guided the father to build a stronger and closer relationship with his children.

The father began to regain his sense of self-dignity and the motivation to work hard to improve his family's situation. Through physical therapy, his health also slowly began to improve. In recent years, he has been able to find some handicraft work to do to earn income. Gradually, the family's circumstances improved, with the family becoming more tight-knit as well as financially stable. The nuns really appreciated Tzu Chi's help and how it has changed things for the better for the family, while never trying to change the family's religious beliefs. That is why when the nuns saw our volunteers again, they wanted to let us know how the family was doing."

After sharing this story to give an example of how Tzu Chi helps families in need not only by providing material and financial aid, but also by giving them care and helping them foster better relationships within the family, the Master added:

"Actually, in Tzu Chi, even after we have stopped providing families financial aid because they no longer need it, we still visit them on special festivals. Sometimes, we discover that the family has encountered some misfortune and needs aid once again, in which case we resume the financial aid."

But, from her experiences, the Master has observed that helping people out of poverty takes

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more than improving their material circumstances. She thus continued:



"How can we truly help them to leave poverty? A lot has to do with a change in the people's thinking, outlook, and perspective—an inner change in their heart and mind. So, we encourage people to participate in recycling work with us. We help them understand that they have a lot to offer—by getting involved in recycling work, they can do something good for the community; it can also help protect the environment, and the proceeds can also help others. Sometimes the people think that since they are not well-off there is not much they can do, but we let them know that by doing recycling work, they can really help to protect the environment. We would explain the reasoning behind recycling and how it can help reduce carbon emissions and conserve resources. So, gradually, some of these people have gotten involved in recycling and have become our regular recycling volunteers.

While working at our recycling sites, they also discover that some of the other fellow volunteers they are working with in fact come from very good backgrounds. Even those with high educations, high-paying jobs, or high social status are doing recycling work like them. This gives them a big boost in morale and makes them even more committed to the work. Because everyone is doing recycling work, everyone is like one family. No one differentiates them as people who receive Tzu Chi's aid or people who are impoverished. In fact, if other volunteers should know of their circumstances, the volunteers would be even kinder, warmer, and more caring toward them, to put them at ease and make them feel comfortable and part of the family. Therefore, these people, despite being poor, can nevertheless give back to society and develop hearts rich with love. So, I call these people 'the rich among the poor'—though materially poor, they are very rich in heart."

The Master went on to share:

"There are also people under Tzu Chi's care who are inspired to help people. They are also 'the rich among the poor'. For example, while they receive monthly aid from Tzu Chi, they would donate a small percentage of the money to help people in need. When they do so, they feel they are also contributing as a Tzu Chi member and it gives them great joy. They know the money will be used to help people because they often hear Tzu Chi volunteers talk about the latest works that Tzu Chi is carrying out. They understand that the money from Tzu Chi comes from tiny individual donations, a few cents here, a dollar there. Knowing that they can also be a part of this and help Tzu Chi help people in suffering, they feel very happy and fulfilled.

And because they do good deeds like this or join Tzu Chi volunteers in recycling or other volunteer work, they won't feel so despairing, helpless, or negative about their own situation. Before, they might have compared themselves with those better off and felt angry or bitter about their lot. But the more they are around Tzu Chi volunteers and the more they take part in good works with our volunteers, the more their thoughts, feelings, and perspective change. Though

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their financial or material circumstances might not have radically changed, with a different outlook, they feel content and grateful for all that they already have.



They even feel motivated to help others. If they receive NT\$5,000 a month from Tzu Chi, they may donate NT\$100 every month. When our volunteers tell them they don't have to donate so much since their circumstances are also difficult, they reply that if not for Tzu Chi, they wouldn't be able to get by at all. So, they want to do something to give back and to help others in turn. They know that through their donation, others can be helped. They feel very happy to be able to give. With such a heart, they no longer feel negative or bitter about their circumstances. Their hearts are full of love and giving. That is why I call them 'the rich among the poor'."

The Master concluded:

"In this way, everyone can be rich. Everyone can help others. In Taiwan, there are already many people like this, and that is why I say that Taiwan's most precious resource is the love and goodness of its people. Do you not think so?"

When everyone in society has such love for others, won't society be very peaceful and harmonious?"

Written by the Jing Si Abode English Editorial Team
Based on Dharma Master Cheng Yen's talks and conversations with visitors