

Surgeon Needs Calm of the Dharma

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation

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[The Real Life Stories]

Within the last 48 hours, I have completed three operations, working without stopping. I feel totally exhausted. All three required a high degree of precision – liver, pancreas and spleen. How can we tell the difficulties of the three procedures? We can tell from the reaction of my teachers.

During my first surgery, on the liver, one of my professors: Professor Yin (Director of Transplant Surgery Yin Wen Yao) was standing next to me, watching every stage. At the end, when I successfully removed the entire tumor from the patient, Professor Yin said to me with a smile: “congratulations”. Therefore the liver surgery was completed with my ‘Sensei’ (a Japanese word meaning teacher) at my side from beginning to end.

Before the third surgery, of the spleen, another teacher of mine, Professor Wei (Director of General Surgery Wei Chang Kuo) encouraged me before I began, by saying: “you have been extremely busy these last two days”. He stood next to me, observing quietly throughout the procedure. It was satisfactorily accomplished, with the company of another ‘sensei’.

After the completion of the three operations, I have a very strong feeling inside me. It has been 10 years since I graduated and entered the surgery field. I started with the most basic training in handling and operational procedures. Now I can operate independently and complete the most difficult surgeries. I am very moved and grateful. I deeply thank those “Senseis” who guided and taught me all along the road during these 10 years. I would also like to share with you my inner thoughts.

From my first year of residency until now, I have often encountered many difficulties, regardless of whether it is a simple or complicated surgery. Every time I stood in front of the operating table, I felt helpless and asked myself: “What should I do to calm myself down?”



What method did I use to calm down? It is what Master Cheng Yen has taught us in ‘the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings’. Every time I feel panic or do not know what to do next, the scripture comes to my mind:

“Our mind is clear and translucent and our vows are as vast as the endless void.
Our conviction is unwavering for countless eons.
Innumerable dharma paths become clear to us.
Great wisdom shall be ours and we will penetrate the true reality of all things.”

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Through this meditation of scripture, I calm myself down, can find a breakthrough and seek a solution. Therefore I am truly grateful to Master Cheng Yen for what she has taught me in how to calm my heart first, so that I can help my patient check out of the hospital in good health.

During my 10 years of medical practice, I have found another way to help me through the most difficult moments. This is the motto of Tzu Chi University which is often quoted by Master Cheng Yen: “loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity”. They are the so-called “Four Immeasurables”. I have found them especially useful with patients who cannot be treated through surgery; most either have cirrhosis or terminal-stage cancer. After we reach a diagnosis, we realize that surgery can do little to help them; the best I can do is to take very good care of them during their final days. ☐☐☐

Patients with this kind of inoperable condition very often tell me: “Doctor Chang, seeing you here with me really can put me at ease.” When I hear this, I say to myself: “I am just doing what I can to look after my patients, but I have no other way to treat and cure them”. At that moment, I feel so helpless and so sad -- until I think of what Master Cheng Yen once said about the Four All-Embracing Virtues*. One of them is the virtue of giving, which includes the giving of Dharma, the giving of courage (to free others from fear) and the giving of wealth (material things)

Then I think of the same giving of courage as Master Cheng Yen has taught me: let patients feel at ease with no fear, so that they and I can fight their sickness together. Thanks to this state of mind, I have been able for the past 10 years to provide a little extra care for those patients for whom no surgery is possible.

I feel that it is most important to experience and implement the dharma we have been taught by Master Cheng Yen. I feel so blessed to grow up and work within the big umbrella of the Tzu Chi family. We can learn from the example set by so many good and compassionate doctors. Let us with all our heart help those who need our help the most. Be full of gratitude!

The Teaching of Master Cheng Yen

Doctor Chang, indeed I know that you are exhausted in your work! You have completed three major operations, one after the other, each very difficult. But, 10 years after your graduation, I see that you have matured and can operate on your own. Although it is exhausting, it brings you happiness. Your teachers beside you will encourage and support you through every surgery you perform. Not only do your “Senseis” acknowledge you, most important, your patients do so as well.

To have a clear and transparent mind is extremely important. Always maintain this state of mind, together with “loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity”; this is the path. As well as giving that frees others from fear. Let patients feel that, once they see you there, they feel at ease. It is tiring but worthwhile. Whenever you feel hardship, you must encourage yourself by saying “it is worth it”. You must carry on. Bless you. Be thankful to your “Senseis” and be grateful to your patients.

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*Four All-Embracing Virtues: charitable offerings, loving words, beneficial conduct, and cooperative deeds

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