

A Kind Soul Who Helped So Many

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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In Memory of Dr. Leh Siu-Chuan, TIMA Philippines (1934-2012)

It was on April 7, 1995 that the Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA) Philippines held its first free clinic at the makeshift setting of the local Lions Club in a remote mountainous village in Baguio. A total of 22 doctors and nurses from Manila's Chinese General Hospital, joined by a team of Tzu Chi volunteers, brought all the necessary equipment and medicines; they spent three days in the village, operating on 173 patients who had never had the chance to receive proper medical services before.

The Philippines consists of more than 7,000 islands, big and small, spread over a vast area in the west Pacific Ocean; that makes travel between the many small, remote and less developed islands and the main islands very difficult. In addition, the huge gap in wealth between the haves and the have-nots leaves many of the less fortunate who live in these remote islands in dire straits. Many of these poor people have not had the opportunity to visit a hospital or see a doctor during their whole life!

This first successful Tzu Chi Free Clinic in the Philippines was made possible Doctor Leh Siu Chuan, who was then deputy director of the Chinese General Hospital in Manila. He was a tall, strong man with an unforgettable, heart-warming laugh and big belly, just like a Smiling Buddha in motion. A devoted Catholic, Dr. Leh was a third generation Chinese Filipino, whose ancestors came from Jinjing City in Fujian Province, China. He graduated from Penn State University School of Medicine, earned an M.D. degree in 1966, and went on to become an associate professor at the school at the age of 30.



He first encountered Tzu Chi in 1995, when Linda Chua, the first CEO of its Philippines chapter, asked him to help organize the Tzu Chi Free Clinic; she had heard of the good reputation of Dr. Leh in charity work among medical and social welfare groups. After listening to her proposal, Dr. Leh was very moved, but one doubt remained in his mind: "is it really possible for a Catholic and a Buddhist group to work together?" he asked. Sister Linda assured him, saying: "Tzu Chi is an international Buddhist organization with a reputation of being open-minded and has worked seamlessly with partners from all different faiths." Dr. Leh took her at her word and went on to help organize the first free clinic.

"I still remember how the team spent so much energy preparing for it," he recalled. "Our doctors even spent time to personally sterilize the makeshift operating rooms to make sure they met strict medical standards, in order to give our patients the best service they could."

Traditionally, Chinese Filipino communities focused on their own economic success; they have

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accumulated considerable wealth, tended to live comfortably in their own enclaves and pay no attention to other segments of society. As a result, for years, others have regarded them as rich but indifferent to others.

“But, after years of efforts from TIMA, Chinese Filipino communities began to co-operate with each other to serve the needy, so people gradually changed the negative impressions they had of Chinese Filipinos,” said Dr. Leh.

He became involved in TIMA’s operations but knew little about the foundation until he had the chance to visit the Jing Si Abode in Hualien, Taiwan during the Mid-Autumn Festival on September 27, 1996 and met Dharma Master Cheng Yen in person.



“I thought what I would see is just another glorious Buddhist temple, with all those golden statues and smokes of burning incense everywhere,” he recalled. “But, at the first sight of the Jing Si Abode, I couldn’t believe my eyes. All I could see was a very clean and minimal hall with three elegant, white Buddha statues and no big red candles, incense or offerings in the hall typical of traditional temples. The Shi-fus (monastic disciples of Master Cheng Yen) in the Jing Si Abode told me that they don’t need those external things to remind them of being Buddhist, because Buddhas live within the mind of everybody. This really took me to a whole new level of understanding of what kind of Buddhist organization Tzu Chi really is.”

He continued: “when I finally met with Master Cheng Yen, she told me how she started the Tzu Chi Foundation and how she managed to get Tzu Chi Hospital off the ground and serve so many needy people. This further enhanced my understanding of Tzu Chi. I thought that, if a lady as thin and frail as Master Cheng Yen can undertake such incredible tasks to serve and to help, then how about me? So, ever since that inspirational trip back to Hualien, I am fully committed to shouldering the responsibilities of running a successful Tzu Chi Free Clinic in the Philippines,” he concluded.

Because of his dedication, TIMA began to take hold in the Philippines; more and more medical personnel have joined, to give something back to their society, and the number of people being helped by TIMA has been growing continuously.

Dr. Leh also inadvertently contributed to a TIMA tradition. Since the first time he came to visit Master Cheng Yen during the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival in 1996, TIMA members from the Philippines always came to see her at the same time during the year; so it became a TIMA tradition to hold their annual meeting during the festival. TIMA members from all around the globe fly back to Hualien to celebrate, exchange views and learn from and inspire each other. It is also the opportunity for Master Cheng Yen to enjoy a reunion with the TIMA members and to thank each and every one who has contributed to the great cause of the association. Both Master Cheng Yen and the members deeply cherish this annual tradition.

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Since the first free clinic in April 1995, TIMA Philippines has held 152 such outreaches, serving more than 10,000 needy patients. For TIMA members, Tzu Chi Free Clinic is living proof that love can transcend all boundaries be it race, faith or appearance. Dr. Leh used to say: “the Tzu Chi Free Clinic team is just like a mobile hospital; whenever and wherever is the need, TIMA will come to serve.” He also said he hoped to see the day when there was a Tzu Chi hospital in the Philippines.

Three years ago, Dr Leh had a stroke. It was so serious that he had to remain in intensive care for a period and never fully recovered. Sadly, he passed away on August 17, 2012 in Manila, aged 78. When Master Cheng Yen heard the news of his passing, she sent her condolences to Dr. Leh’s family and to the members of the foundation in the Philippines. She said: “I know how hard it is for all of you and I hope he will be back with us soon.”

Adapted from Tzu Chi Monthly and Da Ai TV

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