

## A New Skill Can Stop the Tears

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation  
Sunday, 25 February 2007 00:00

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When a fire took her son's life, she cried and cried until no more tears would come. Crushed by this cruel twist of fate, she could feel nothing but despair. How was she to recover from her loss? What strength could she draw on to soothe the searing pain in her heart?

At seven one evening, nearly 30 housewives had gathered in a well-lit, spacious room on the first floor of a townhouse in Dali, Taichung County, central Taiwan. Here to attend a fruit carving class, the women sat expectantly around nine long tables, patiently awaiting the arrival of their teacher.

"Here comes the teacher!" someone announced.

Carrying three large bags of fruit in her hands, Lin Mei-zhu (林美珠) opened the front door and strode in. Some of the attendees jumped up from their seats, took the bags from her, and set out to wash and distribute the fruit to everyone else in the room. Everything progressed in an orderly manner, even though no one was in command.

A short while later, Mei-zhu looked around the room and asked, "Have you all got your fruit?" After ascertaining that everyone was ready, she continued in a ringing voice, "Let's start then."



She took out a fruit knife, which used to belong to her oldest son, from her tool kit. "Everybody, please look here. First, slice an apple into eight pieces. Then use your carving knife to create two slight cuts on one of the slices; it'll make the slice look like a rabbit's ear. Immerse the slice in salt water, take it out and put it on a plate. Repeat the same procedure until you are done with all eight pieces. Then move all of them to a large plate and arrange them into a round shape--doesn't it resemble a flower in full bloom?"

"Cut each piece slowly. There is no need to hurry. Calm your mind. Slicing fruit can be a kind of spiritual cultivation. I'll go to each of you and show you how to carve the fruit."

It took Mei-zhu 40 minutes to complete her round. When she was finished, she stopped at her own table and announced, "Next, we'll cut the star fruit. Hold a star fruit in your hand, cut the edges away, and trim the top and bottom evenly." She went on to explain each step in detail.

"Then put the cherry tomatoes around the apple slices and put the starfruit in the middle. Ta-da! Isn't it beautiful?"

"It's so beautiful," exclaimed one student. "Teacher, I want to take this home and show it off to my husband."

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"Teacher, how do I arrange the other fruit?" asked another student. The question reminded Mei-zhu that she had once asked her son the same question.

"After you've learned how to slice the fruit, you'll naturally know how to arrange them," Mei-zhu answered.

The class passed in laughter and merriment. Although Mei-zhu was on her feet for two hours, she did not feel tired at all. She was more than glad she could pass on the fruit-carving art her son had taught her.



### A deadly fire

If you open newspapers published in Taiwan on February 16, 1995, you will find that all the front-page headlines reported the same tragic fire that took the lives of 64 people and injured 11. The merciless conflagration broke out at a famous restaurant in Taichung called Welcome, where Mei-zhu's oldest son, Zhi-ming (志明), worked as a chef.

The day the fire occurred was seared into Mei-zhu's memory. On February 15, she was sitting by the window of her family's living room as usual, mending clothes. At around noontime, Zhi-ming finished his lunch, put on his coat, and said to Mei-zhu, "Mom, I'm off to work."

"Okay. Be careful riding that motorcycle." Mei-zhu raised her head from her sewing machine and watched her son walk out the front door. She never thought that that would be the last time she would see and talk to her beloved son.

Mei-zhu's husband, Zheng-sen (正森), worked as a driver at the Taichung District Court. At seven that evening, he happened to be on duty driving the procurator-general. When their car arrived at the Taichung Railway Station, Zheng-sen found that almost all the major roads in the vicinity were blocked. A traffic police officer told him a fire had broken out at the Welcome restaurant on nearby Zhonggang Road. "The Buddha bless my son!" Zheng-sen felt fortunate because Zhi-ming had just been transferred from the fire-ravaged restaurant to another branch on Wenxin Road three days before.

After driving the procurator-general to his destination, Zheng-sen went straight home. His younger brother happened to be visiting. During their conversation, Zheng-sen told him about the fire at Welcome. When Mei-zhu, who was cooking dinner, overheard the news, she said to her husband, "Our son was supposed to work at Welcome this afternoon. How come you didn't tell me about the fire earlier?"

"Don't worry. Zhi-ming works at the branch on Wenxin Road, not the one on Zhonggang Road where the fire is. Besides, restaurant kitchens have doors that lead outside. Even if a fire did break out, he'll be able to get out quickly." However, after Zheng-sen had thus reassured his wife, he was unnerved by her worried look, and so he called their son on his pager.

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After a long while, Zhi-ming still hadn't called back. Mei-zhu felt she could not sit around waiting anymore. She urged her husband to go to the fire scene with her.

"It's not a good time for you to drive," Zheng-sen's brother said to the couple. "Let me drive you two there!"

The roads near the fire scene were in complete chaos, so the three of them had to make several detours to get to the restaurant. As soon as they got there, Mei-zhu spotted her son's motorcycle in the parking lot. A-fu, the head chef of the restaurant, hurried up to her. "What should we do now?" he asked Mei-zhu in an unsteady voice. "None of the chefs have come out. Zhi-ming is in there too. Today business was better than usual, so I asked him to come over to help. After he came, I went to the branch on Wenxin Road to take care of some business. On my way there, I heard of the fire and immediately hurried back."

Mei-zhu's knees went limp as soon as she heard that her son was indeed in the burning building. She collapsed to the ground and burst out crying.



### **The abysmal depths of despair**

"I heard that those who were injured have been taken to the hospitals. Perhaps you should go take a look," a bystander suggested. Zheng-sen helped his wife to her feet, and they rushed to several major hospitals to look for their son. However, there was no sign of Zhi-ming. In the end, Mei-zhu asked her brother-in-law to drive them to the city morgue.

The morgue, with its hallways jam-packed with burnt, misshapen bodies, was like a living hell. Because too many bodies had been delivered there all at once, staff at the morgue had had to erect tents overnight to accommodate the deceased.

Deep into the night, Mei-zhu and Zheng-sen still hadn't found their son. Zheng-sen persuaded his wife to go home with him to await further news.

That night, unable to fall asleep, Mei-zhu sat wide awake in the living room. She did not even dare turn on the television for fear of seeing her son's name on the list of the dead. Whenever she heard the sound of a motorcycle engine, she would rush to the door and look out. After passing such an agonizing night, she heard the phone ring at five in the morning. She dashed to the phone, picked up the receiver, and called out her son's name, "Zhi-ming!"

It was not her son but a police officer calling to ask them to go to the morgue to identify Zhi-ming's body. Feeling as if her soul had departed from her body, Mei-zhu returned to the morgue, leaning on her husband's arm.

Dimly lit, the morgue was full of the sounds of people crying and inquiring how they could locate the bodies of their family members. The scene was heartrending. Mei-zhu and Zheng-sen could

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not bring themselves to uncover each body to look for their son, so they were at a loss for what to do. But then an idea struck Zheng-sen--they could call their son's pager. As soon as they did so, a pager went off, and they followed the beeping sound to its source. "Here, here, this one!"

The sight of her son blackened by smoke had Mei-zhu in tears again. Although Zheng-sen was heartbroken too, he had to compose himself so that he could comfort his wife and complete all the necessary body-identification procedures.

The sky gradually grew lighter. After crying for quite a long time, Mei-zhu suddenly heard someone speak to her in a soft voice: "Come, have some hot soup to warm yourself up. Since the inevitable has happened, let's pray for the soul of the deceased and try to let go." Mei-zhu lifted her head and saw a Tzu Chi volunteer holding a bowl of steaming hot soup.

Through her tear-streaked eyes, Mei-zhu recognized another volunteer in the crowd, Zhang Yun-lan (張雲蘭). "Yun-lan," Mei-zhu cried out, "Why did heaven take away my son? He's only 24, still so young!"

"Don't be sad," Yun-lan comforted her. "Master Cheng Yen said, 'Life's like a train ride: We all have to get off when we come to our stop.'" Mei-zhu tried to take comfort in her words.

A few days later, Mei-zhu donated the relief money she had received from Tzu Chi--NT\$10,000 (US\$300)--along with her son's savings back to the charity foundation.

### Healing sadness by giving love

"After our son died, Mei-zhu's heart seemed to have died too," Zheng-sen remembered. "She stayed at home all day long, wallowing in sadness. She couldn't even bring herself to step out of our home. It was like she was suffering from depression."

Zheng-sen did his best to cheer his wife up, but all his efforts proved futile. More than two months after the tragedy, Mei-zhu was still deeply submerged in grief. "Fortunately, during that period of time Tzu Chi volunteers often visited us to express their care and concern. They encouraged Mei-zhu to take part in Tzu Chi activities, hoping to divert her mind from the painful loss of our son."

At the invitation of the volunteers, Mei-zhu did indeed begin to go along with them to help the needy. The first time she visited the poor with Tzu Chi volunteers, their destination was the village of Mailiao, an 80-minute drive away. Yun-lan asked Mei-zhu to drive. When she returned home from the visit, she was so tired that she collapsed onto her bed without even having dinner. That was the first time she had slept so well since her son passed away. She said she then understood why Master Cheng Yen taught her followers to "sleep peacefully, eat happily, laugh merrily, and give joyfully."

Mei-zhu still distinctly remembers the care recipients they called upon on her second visit to the poor. One of the care recipients was a mother afflicted with polio who had to take care of her children alone, the other a woman whose husband had just passed away, leaving behind five children for her to raise. "'How are they going to support themselves?' I remember thinking to

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myself at that time. Seeing them, I was more deeply aware of the fact that life is full of suffering. What do I have to complain about? My son did not leave anything behind for me to worry about. I should really be grateful for that." She suddenly felt an ease of mind that she had not been able to feel since her son died, as if a huge burden had been lifted from her shoulders. "On our way back home, the other volunteers, seeing that I was apparently in a very good mood, asked me what I was so happy about."

On January 24, 1996, about a year after her son passed away, Mei-zhu was certified as a Tzu Chi commissioner by Master Cheng Yen. In the biography that she submitted for her certification, she wrote, "Life is short, no more than a few decades. Rather than losing myself in sorrow, I chose to open my mind and reach out to help others. I am glad I could become a cheerful Tzu Chi volunteer and help irrigate and nourish every inch of dry land with love."



### Passing down her skills

"Because my son was a chef, Yun-lan thought I must be good at cooking too. So I was often asked to cook for our volunteers at various Tzu Chi activities." In addition to cooking for volunteers, Mei-zhu also conducted a series of classes to teach people how to prepare vegetarian meals.

Later, some volunteers learned that she was also talented at fruit carving, so they asked her to hold classes and impart her skills.

"Take three light cuts on a cherry tomato, and you will come up with a little rabbit. A lemon can be cut into the shape of a mouse, a guava into bodhi leaves, and a watermelon rind into human figures worshipping the Buddha." One photograph after another testified to Mei-zhu's excellent fruit-carving skills.

Mei-zhu does not charge any fees for the courses, which span five weeks per session. Attendees only need to pay for the cost of the fruit, and they can even take the final products home. Chen Rong-yu, one of Mei-zhu's students, said elatedly, "Mei-zhu teaches us everything she knows. Whenever I took home the fruit we've carved and arranged, my husband always praised me for my good skills, and even my children said that the fruit not only tasted good but looked good. So I never miss Mei-zhu's classes, no matter where she is conducting them."

Another student, He Yue-yun, also shared her experience: "Some time ago, my son brought home a classmate of his who was suffering from depression and couldn't eat anything. I put my fruit-carving skills to use and cut and arranged some fruit for him. He was so surprised and moved that he not only ate the fruit but left our home with a smile on his face."

Hearing the praise her students heaped on her, Mei-zhu laughed so heartily that her eyes narrowed to slits. "I'm just doing something I enjoy doing," she said modestly.

"When my son died, my heart was filled with nothing but pain and grief. It was only after some

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time that I was able to emerge out of my deep sorrow and learn to replace resentment with care and sadness with love." Talking about the passing of her son, Mei-zhu was no longer sad. Her smile revealed a liberated, unencumbered heart.

After experiencing so much, Mei-zhu has learned to keep her mind open and her thoughts pure, and she often wears a smile on her face. "As a Tzu Chi volunteer, I give without ever thinking of asking for anything in return, and yet I've gained so much happiness. I believe my son in heaven will smile too when he sees me so happy."

By Li Ling

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