

Silent Mentors – Heroes of Life

Written by Johan Alwall

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[Dharma Master Cheng Yen](#) once said: “The greatest suffering in life is illness. If doctors can save more lives by learning from our donated bodies, that would be of great worth.”

I have heard about the Silent Mentor program many times before, and also visited the simulation surgery room at the Tzu Chi university, but sitting there at the Gratitude Concert for the Silent Mentors, in the presence of the families of the Silent Mentors, the students who have been taught by them and their professors, doctors of the [Tzu Chi International Medical Association](#) from many countries, Tzu Chi volunteers and Dharma Masters from the Jing Si Abode, was a very different experience.

When the Tzu Chi Medical University was first established, they, like most other Medical Universities, were lacking bodies for teaching Gross anatomy. When the principal asked Master Cheng Yen for advice, she asked if he could ensure that donated bodies could be stored in a bright, comfortable and dignified manner. When he answered that this could be done, the Master made a public statement encouraging her disciples to donate their bodies after their death: “While we live, our body is of use to us. After we have passed away, it can be of even greater use, by teaching doctors to save lives”.



Since the first body donor, Mrs. Lin, more than 27000 people have signed the agreement to become, as Tzu Chi calls it, “silent mentors”. They are called this because, while they have forever lost their ability to teach by speaking, they can still teach the most important lessons to young doctors; more than anatomy or surgery skills, they also teach the young doctors respect, gratitude and compassion. The doctors get to know their silent mentor, their life history, meet the family of the donor, and treat the silent mentor with gratitude and respect. During the concert, we heard several young doctors talk about how they kept coming back to their silent mentor in their thoughts, about how much they had learned from them, and about the gratitude they felt towards them.

Some of the most touching moments during the concerts was the statements from body donors. Thanks to the knowledge that their body will become of the highest use after their death, they could depart in peace. “The moment the scalpel of a doctor student cuts through my body, that is the moment when my dream comes true.” One donor told his wife on the night before his death: “Don't worry about me – I will go back to Hualien, to my spiritual home.” “What about me”, she asked. “You should hurry back home, and continue our recycling work in our community. Now I get to do a final recycling, that of my own body, to help doctors learn to save lives.”

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Towards the end of the program, Master Cheng Yen mentioned the serene, almost joyful, look on the faces of some of her disciples, who had asked that the ambulance would make a stop at the Jing Si abode to pay a last farewell to Master before going to the Tzu Chi University.



No less moving is the support of the families in respecting the wish and of the deceased. We heard several stories about family members rushing the silent mentor to reach Hualien within the necessary time limit of 8 hours after death, despite raging typhoon winds and rain.

As the number of donated bodies grew, they were soon more than needed for anatomy teaching. A professor at the University realized that the bodies can be used for simulation surgery, to allow doctors to practice surgical procedures without endangering the safety of patients.

“Whenever I have questions during an operation, I will keep them in mind, and I will then use the opportunity when I can do a simulation surgery to learn the answers. When I was in the US, I learned a new type of surgical procedure. Before I used it on patients here in Taiwan, I could try it on a silent mentor, allowing me to perfect the procedure before trying it on living patients,” said one doctor.

“I am extremely grateful to the silent mentors. When I do tough surgeries, I always think about the silent mentors, and the courage, compassion and love that I learned from them.”



The dedication, sincerity and compassion of the students was also very moving. Professor Wang, the professor in charge of the Silent mentor program, told us:

– The first time I took the students to clean the cremation site, I was nervous because they are all the “precious babies” of their families. Then I saw one of the students actually use his own toothbrush to carefully clean a toilet bowl at the crematorium. This is the sense of compassionate dedication that we need to help the students keep throughout their education, and help them nurture as practicing doctors.

This is something truly unique in the world – not only is the idea of progressive surgery simulations using real bodies, in an environment and temperature which exactly replicates that of a regular surgery room, but even more the respect and gratitude for the silent mentors, and the emphasis on respect and compassion for future patients that this fosters in the doctor students. And this amazing concert, with performances by the students, the doctors who have learned from the silent mentors through simulation surgery, doctors at the Tzu Chi hospitals and professors at the Tzu Chi university, and many sharings by doctors and families to the silent mentors, is a very worthy farewell to these “heroes of life”.