

Seizing Upon the Seed of a Good Thought

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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[[Master's Teachings](#)]

In a conversation with Dharma Master Cheng Yen, a renowned writer in Taiwan remarked that he found her to have novel and refreshingly different approaches in every field of work she gets involved in, bringing new concepts to the field. Raising the medical field as an example, he asked her if she could talk about what her vision for a better kind of medical care was.

The Master replied:

“Actually, to be honest, I don’t first have a blueprint of what I want to do, or make plans to achieve certain things. Rather, our medical mission got started because of our charity work, which brought me into contact with a lot of people in hardship. As we helped these families, I witnessed first-hand how often poverty brought on illness and how illness dragged families into poverty. I was also brought face to face with how scarce medical resources were in Hualien. To be ill in Hualien was a heartbreaking plight.”

“I deeply felt that every life needed to be respected. At the same time, as the Buddha said, illness and the suffering it brings are inherent to life. All of us in this world will experience aging and ill health, and it isn’t only in old age that we may be afflicted with ailments or illness. Some people are born with a disease or a congenital disorder, and though it causes them tremendous hardships, the disorder does not take their lives. Because of this they have to endure the pain for a very long time. Some of the people we care for in Tzu Chi are like this. They truly suffer terribly. So, it is part of the human experience to go through birth, aging, sickness, and death; but with disease on top of that, the suffering is truly excruciating. Encountering this kind of suffering as I carried out charity work, naturally I felt compassion—in those conditions, witnessing others’ pain and hardship, a person’s sense of compassion will naturally come forth and grow.”

“With this compassion came the thought of helping. It was just a thought that flashed through my mind in that one moment in time, but I held onto that thought and pursued it. I kept thinking about what could be done to help people get the medical help they needed. In Buddhism, we say that our thoughts are very important. If a good thought arises, that can lead to the creation of good causes and conditions or good karma. But a bad thought can likewise lead to the creation of bad causes and conditions. Our bad karma comes about because in the instant that a bad thought surfaced, we weren’t able to change the direction of our thoughts. Practicing Buddhism, we learn to nurture only good thoughts. Also, when a good thought arises, we need to take hold of it and not let it slip away. It’s very important to seize that moment and carry it forward.”

“So, to help these poor and ill people get the medical care they needed, we started a free clinic. There were four doctors from the Hua-Lien Hospital (a government-run hospital) who were willing to help me, and they were from the departments of internal medicine, surgery, pediatrics,

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obstetrics and gynecology. With them on board, we opened our free clinic center, providing free medical care twice a week.”

“It was this free clinic that really made me see how tragic were the circumstances of the Hualien people. Though the clinic could provide free medical consultations, to determine people’s illnesses we would need to send them to hospitals for diagnostic tests; yet, every time we brought the patients to the Hua-Lien Hospital, we would be told that the hospital did not have the equipment to conduct the needed examinations. We would then bring the patients to the Mennonite Christian Hospital. But there, the doctors would tell us the same—that no hospital in eastern Taiwan conducted such advanced testing. The people would then need to be sent to the more state-of-the-art hospitals in Taipei. Despite the difficulties and costs this involved, we would do it because every life was priceless, every life needed to be respected. Without correctly diagnosing the illness, the right treatment couldn’t be given. So, we had to find a way to send these patients to Taipei.”

“There were also those who suffered from serious accidents or illnesses who could only get the treatment they needed in Taipei. A few times, when we sent the patient to Taipei, the spouse had to go also, in order to take care of the patient. The children were therefore left behind, and Tzu Chi volunteers even had to take on the duty of looking after their children during that time, regularly visiting their home to look in on them and take care of their needs.”

“So, after three to five years of charity work, we really saw how important medical care was. Then, after starting the free clinic work, we truly experienced how even if you had the financial means, it didn’t matter because you couldn’t get the medical treatment you needed here in eastern Taiwan. It showed me how desperately eastern Taiwan needed a hospital that could provide the same quality medical care as hospitals in Taipei. It was this need that made me resolve to build a quality hospital here in Hualien.”

“My motive was very simple, I just really wanted to build a hospital that was as good as the hospitals in Taipei—that was my only thought. At that time, there were very few Tzu Chi members, but I felt things could not wait. And, once I had spoken of my resolution to build a hospital, I had to keep going forward with it.”

“There were a lot of setbacks along the way. To start, finding land was no easy matter because to build a state-of-the-art hospital, we needed a large piece of land. Small plots of land could not serve that purpose, but large-sized ones were difficult to find. So, just finding land was an arduous task that took many years.”

“Not to mention that to build a hospital of the standard that I envisioned, a lot of resources were needed. At that time, Tzu Chi was still very small, with few members and limited funds for our charity work. But, I had a belief—it comes from what the Buddha once said: ‘Enter my gate and you shall not be poor.’ What constitutes ‘entering the gate’? Having a pure heart of sincerity, integrity, good faith, and honesty. That is, being unselfish and not doing the work for any reason except to benefit others out of a sense of compassion and love. It is that kind of true sincerity, that kind of integrity, that kind of faith and honesty. It is also to be willing to take on burdens and work in order to bring living beings benefit.”

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Continuing to explain the principles and convictions which motivated her to persevere despite the difficulties she encountered, the Master said:

“And in doing this, we dedicate ourselves with the spirit we learn from Buddhist teachings. That is because Tzu Chi is a religious organization—what I mean by ‘religion’ is not a set of beliefs or dogma but a kind of education that leads us to discover life’s true purpose and meaning, and teaches us about life and living. That is why in Tzu Chi we are inclusive of people from all religions as well as nationalities and races; we are not trying to convert people to a certain religion. But, learning life’s true purpose and how we should live are very important things. It is my hope that everyone can understand life’s purpose and find direction in life. Life’s truths are very deep and profound, and some people may go through their entire lives never finding the right direction. Also, as I said earlier, we need to cultivate ourselves so that we can develop a heart of sincerity, integrity, good faith, and honesty. This is a lifelong endeavor. Besides this, we need to go deeper to find our true nature: the nature of pure, untainted love that is the same as the Buddha’s. This is what we cultivate for. In this way, ‘religion’ cannot be separated from the practice of cultivating oneself. But, though these are our beliefs, we can work in harmony with people of other religions, such as Catholic nuns, priests, and ministers. So, this is just to share with you the perspective on life that we have in Tzu Chi.”

After sharing the spirit in which she does her work and the convictions that give her the courage to go forward, the Master continued her retelling of what it was like trying to build the Tzu Chi hospital in Hualien:

“When building the hospital, therefore, we started from nothing, just working with the conviction I described earlier: ‘Enter my gate and you shall not be poor’. But, there were a lot of different opinions among the public. Many said that we must have too much money on our hands to be doing this. Some of the comments were rather disparaging and hurtful, but I always encouraged our volunteers to be understanding and try to take the comments in a positive way.”

“I would remind our volunteers that so long as we are truly sincere in trying to do something good for society, the money will come. People will be willing to give and contribute to the cause. It really depends on whether we genuinely have the conviction to undertake the project, and whether we are truly selfless and do it unconditionally.”

“That time of building the hospital was truly a very difficult time. It wasn’t just difficult to raise funds; what was hardest was the pressure I faced from many different quarters, especially with the many criticisms and negative pressure from the media and society. But through all the trials, I always reminded myself to have faith—faith in myself and what I was doing, for my intentions were truly pure and selfless; and faith in others, for deep down in every person, there is love and kindness. It was this kind of conviction that gave me the daring to continue with the project. Many people also had the courage to believe in our cause and lend us their support. And so, it is with this kind of faith based in sincerity and integrity that everyone came together and accomplished this undertaking of building the hospital.”

As it turned out, the completion of the hospital did not mean the end of her difficulties. The Master went on to share:

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“But, after the hospital was built, we encountered an even more difficult challenge—finding personnel. Arduous as the construction was, with all its hardships and setbacks, with perseverance we could come through it. But the true difficulty lay in getting skilled professionals to come. If you built a hospital in an urban area, perhaps you’d only need to build good facilities and people will be willing to join your staff. But this is not so with eastern Taiwan. Even with the developments in the transportation system, making travel to and from the metropolitan areas very quick and convenient, people still always think of eastern Taiwan as ‘the backwoods’. So, it’s not easy to get skilled professionals to come work here, even now. Those who come are people who share our goal of looking after the health of people in this underserved region of Taiwan. To be willing to come, they need to feel a sense of mission toward their profession. Besides this, we also ask that our doctors have integrity and live up to the noble values of their profession. So, it is those who share our goals and vision who come here to serve. It is not easy work, and they shoulder a very heavy load.”

Having established the hospital, the Master came to find that it was not enough. She explained:

“After establishing our hospital, we gradually became aware of another issue—I started to see how the values of society at large were changing, especially in the way we were educating our young. Before, people went into medicine because they wanted to be in a profession that helps people and saves lives. But more and more, as society was changing, money became the most important thing to people and many started going into medicine for the money. That’s truly worrying. Doctors need to save lives. They have to be motivated by pure intentions. It’s very important that they go about their work with the right intentions. That’s what led me to the thought of building a medical school and a nursing school here in Hualien.”

“Another concern was the need for nurses from the local area. Most of our nurses came from other parts of Taiwan, and they could not stay in the area for long because their family did not want them to settle down in eastern Taiwan. The turnover rate was very high, and we were continually needing nurses. It just so happened that around that time, there was a lot of news of young indigenous girls in eastern Taiwan being sold to Taiwan’s urban areas. Their situation was truly heartbreaking. It occurred to me: why don’t we give these young indigenous people vocational training in medical professions and job opportunities in our hospital? This would offer them a path to a better future, and help fulfill the need for local nurses. Nowadays, seeing the widespread shortage of nurses in hospitals around Taiwan as well as the sight of many people turning away from nursing because of the bad press the profession is getting, I’m truly grateful that we established a nursing school.”

After sharing all this, the Master concluded:

“So you see, this is how our medical mission and educational mission came about. In a nutshell, it is about taking hold of the good thought that arises—which is the seed—and persevering to bring that initial good thought into fruition.”

Written by the Jing Si Abode English Editorial Team
Based on Dharma Master Cheng Yen’s conversations with visitors in Chinese