

Dharma and Gospel: Together in My Life

Written by Peggy Lo

Wednesday, 01 August 2012 15:17



When my mom first started volunteering for Tzu Chi, I was already active in a local high school church youth group. Looking back, I was more of a social Christian at the time. I believed in God, I prayed, and I occasionally read the Bible, but I did not have a disciplined way of studying or practicing my faith. Meanwhile, I was fascinated by the story of Master Cheng Yen and the incredible work she did and inspired people to do. So, when I was invited to participate in the Hospital Volunteer Camp in Hualien the summer before my senior year of high school, I jumped at the opportunity.

I was so moved that I wrote my college application essay about the experience, focusing on the mural in the lobby of Hualien Tzu Chi Medical Center, the image of the Buddha comforting the sick. During the camp, I learned that the hospital was a place for healing not just the body but also the spirit, and I was moved by the dedication of the volunteers, the smiles of the patients, and the joy that comes from reducing another's suffering. Surprisingly, the biggest mental adjustment of staying at the Jing Si Abode had to do with culture rather than religion. I did not enjoy waking up at 3:20 each morning, but I did enjoy the physical part of the morning recitations. When everyone sang the offering song before meals, I simply prayed a prayer similar to the words of the song.



After I returned home, I became more involved with Tzu Chi and even started a Tzu Shao group for high school students in New Jersey. I was inspired by Master Cheng Yen and the message that carrying out volunteer work not only helps recipients, but also helps and changes the volunteers.

Around that time I started to question traditional, organized Christianity. My questions were not being addressed or discussed in youth group and the people there were not very encouraging about my involvement in Tzu Chi, so I stopped attending youth group. Though I still identified myself as a Christian, I did so with the caveat that I was spiritual but not religious because I did not want to be tied to organized religion.

Since I have been involved with Tzu Chi for many years, I am sometimes asked whether I have ever thought about becoming a Buddhist. Even during the periods of my most intense involvement in college, I never seriously did. For a long time I could not pinpoint why I felt this way, except that, to me, Buddhism always felt more like a philosophy because I connected with it on an intellectual level but not on an emotional or spiritual level. All along, I admired the work Tzu Chi was doing and I was always touched by volunteers' testimonies of transformation. Whenever I prayed to be somewhere where I could be of great use, I always found myself back in Tzu Chi. But I never felt a desire to become a Buddhist.

Dharma and Gospel: Together in My Life

Written by Peggy Lo

Wednesday, 01 August 2012 15:17

In August 2009, my Tzu Chi involvement deepened as I started translating with the Dharma as Water team. Not long after, I began attending Grace Cathedral in January 2010. Ever since, these two aspects of my life have enhanced and strengthened each other. I constantly see echoes of one in the other. In the very first sermon I heard at Grace Cathedral, an Episcopal church, the priest said that we should always remember to focus on the moon and not the finger pointing to the moon. I laughed immediately, because this was also a constant reminder from Master De Ren, who was the Tzu Ching advisor in Hualien.



Master Cheng Yen has said that she is not creating a new form of Buddhism, but rather taking Buddhism back to its roots. She emphasizes upholding and practicing the Buddha's teachings. Similarly, the Dean of Grace Cathedral, Dr. Jane Shaw, writes that the earliest converts to Christianity were asked not "What do you believe?" but "How has your life been transformed?" and that we should return to this perspective. So I find that I am attracted to people and places that root their practice in the beginnings of their tradition and stress the importance of personal transformation and the quality of interactions with others, rather than focusing on a list of defined beliefs and rituals.

In my translation work with Dharma as Water, I have become much more aware of how language and words can both expand and restrict my understanding. The realizations I attain from actively studying and practicing Christianity also help me translate Master Cheng Yen's words across cultures because I am not just translating the words but also the spirit behind the words.

For example, the word "xīn" in Chinese can mean both "heart" and "mind," but when we translate, we need to pick one. This shows me that seeing the heart and mind dualistically is a somewhat artificial separation. Similarly, in Hebrew the word "lebab" means "mind" and "will" and "heart." Knowing this, I am very conscious when I read the Bible that it is a translated work that needs to be read in the context of the language and time in which it was written. Instead of trying to parse the words themselves, I need to find the meanings to which they point.

At the same time, I am learning tremendous respect and appreciation for the words. When I translate Master Cheng Yen's teachings on the Water Repentance, I try to convey exactly what is being said: no more and no less. I cannot gloss over something because I do not fully understand it, nor can I add something extra because I understand it well. This makes me very aware of what I read. Meanwhile, I am taking a class called Education for Ministry which helps students think about their personal theology and how they can minister to others in their daily living. We read the Old Testament last year and are reading the New Testament this year. In this class, too, I have learned the importance of reading and reflecting on the original words because they often differ from the stories we hear growing up or in popular culture.

Dharma and Gospel: Together in My Life

Written by Peggy Lo

Wednesday, 01 August 2012 15:17

