

From Loneliness to Abundance of Love in Mozambique

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation

Tuesday, 17 September 2013 17:47



“You have wristwatches – all we have is time.” People in southern Africa tend to take their time, and this would drive Denise Tsai crazy. A young woman used to doing things in an orderly and planned manner, she would often argue with her husband Dino, whom she felt was becoming more and more like the locals. He on the other hand, would think that she was blowing things out of proportion. What still comforted her was his respect for her; even though they would constantly argue, he would always let her have it her way, and patiently give her more time to adapt.

With her talent for foreign languages and a large circle of friends, Denise's life in Taiwan was all about fun and variety. So, when she moved abroad after marrying Dino, the difference in lifestyle gave her major culture shock and she became more and more unhappy. At that point, a visit to the Kaohsiung Jing Si Hall during a trip back to Taiwan changed her life.

A lion in a cage

“Although it had been four years since I moved with my husband to Mozambique, I was still not able to adapt to the environment and life there. I felt like I was wasting my life, and I was even thinking about breaking off the marriage.” Denise Tsai, Tzu Chi's first “seed” in Mozambique laughs as she remembers those days, when she felt like she was stuck and couldn't move either forward or backward. “I felt like a lion in a cage; whatever I tried to do it just wouldn't happen.”

When Denise and her husband came back to Taiwan for Chinese New Year in 2012, she had a chat with a friend and told her about her difficulties. “I feel like giving up, but I don't want everybody to laugh at me...” When she first decided to get married to Dino, her family and friends had not been too happy with her decision to go with him to the other end of the world.



“I was thinking I should be able to adjust, but I just couldn't get used to life there.” After the birth of her daughter, Denise was even more concerned. How would her child grow up and get an education in such an environment? Although Mozambique is no longer ravaged by civil war, public security is still an issue, the divide between rich and poor is enormous, and the lack of education is leading to moral degeneracy. These thoughts never left her in peace. Whenever she tried to talk to her husband about considering a move back to Taiwan, he would never give any definite response. Later, she understood that it was because her husband had an inseparable bond with this country in the depth of Sub-Saharan Africa.

“Just because I think my country is bad, I shouldn't just run away to another country. I made all

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that effort to acquire knowledge because I want to do what I can to help improve it.” Hearing these words led her to think back to how his ambition and idealism made her accept him in the first place.

Changing mindset

During her visit back to Taiwan, her friend invited her to see Kaohsiung Jing Si Hall. Her friend arranged for her to meet Tzu Chi volunteer Yang Ming-chin. During his detailed introduction of Tzu Chi's charity and relief work around the world, she was especially amazed to hear of the volunteer work in South Africa. During his tour, brother Ming-chin lightly mentioned how, “Because of the compassion in the heart of a single individual, the lives of so many people who were without any hope have now completely changed. Think about it – when we have challenges in life, shouldn't we double our efforts?” Moved to the core, Denise started to change her outlook.

Ever since she was little, she had enjoyed reading Buddhist texts, and after she grew up she would always follow the tradition to recite sutras on the 1st and 15th of each lunar month. When she was deciding to marry her husband, she raised the issue of religion with him, and he accepted her practices completely. That day at the Jing Si Hall, she realized what the sutras meant by “benefitting others is most important.” Suddenly, her problems and discontent seemed very minor compared to the suffering of others.

Once back in Mozambique, she felt like a lonely seafarer about to be drowned by the swell of a vast ocean. As she over and over again read the book “Diamonds on the Rainbow”, given to her by brother Ming-chin, and listened to the CD “Sutra of Infinite Meanings,” she slowly changed her mindset. She really wanted to talk to Michael Mingshui Pan, Tzu Chi's seed in Durban, South Africa, but brother Michael was in Taiwan at the time and she was not able to reach him.



“Perhaps it was the Heavens testing me!” As the days went on, she felt more and more hopeless, and was about to give up on the whole thing when she suddenly heard her two-year old daughter sing “Tranquil and lucid, with vows as vast as the Universe, remaining unwavering, forever and ever.” The toddler, who was just learning to speak, was repeating the lyrics from the Sutra of Infinite Meanings. The power of the words struck Denise like a revelation. She picked up the phone and once again tried brother Michael's number. This time, he picked up the phone.

“We will have a weekend meeting in May, would it work for you to come?” Almost before Michael had finished the sentence, Denise answered in the affirmative. Unfortunately, due to unexpected events, she was not able to make it that time. Instead, she had to impatiently wait for the next meeting, to be held in July. When the time came, she was already on her way out the door to head to Durban when her daughter suddenly developed a high fever. “What should I do now? I really don't want to pass on this opportunity, but my child is sick and I can't just leave

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her!" Then, her husband said, "Don't worry, I'll take leave to care for her. I have read the information about Tzu Chi, and it's a really good organization. You just go and learn more about it!"

Shame and self-reflection

That was her first time going to Durban for a three-day learning and sharing meeting. The first day, she went with the South African Zulu volunteers into the community to do home visits. Just as she was about to follow the other volunteers into a home, she hesitated. "Do I really want to enter? Will I be able to handle what I see in there?" Brother Michael, who was right next to her, encouraged her: "Just step in and take a look. You have traveled so far, this is your opportunity to learn." She forced herself to step over the threshold. On her way back home, she recalled how the Zulu volunteers had comforted and cared for the person in that home. Thinking about how scared and timid she had been herself, she realized that it was all a matter of her own differentiating and discriminating mindset.

Through her interactions with the local volunteers, she realized that though each of them had painful stories to tell, however, after learning Tzu Chi's concept "love in action," they would still willingly give of their love and extend a helping hand to other people in suffering. The contrast with her previous view of the local people as only extending their hands to beg was stark, and she felt very ashamed. These experiences, and the realization that love can be inspired in anyone, made her decide to start spreading seeds of love in Mozambique.



Back home, she enthusiastically shared with her husband everything she had seen and experienced during the three days in Durban, and her wish to start working to help the local community. Less than a month later, Michael Pan brought several of the local volunteers from Durban to Mozambique to help in the first home visit activity. Denise, who felt scared half out of her wits, thought that it would be enough for her to just refer a case, but the South African volunteers insisted on that she be at the front line interacting with all the cases. In this way, she got to know a single mother with deformed legs, Lurdes. "She makes a living from selling roasted peanuts. Each month, she can make 5 US dollars that she uses to support three children. Me, I would often spend 50 US dollars on a single meal at a restaurant. Oh God! For that money I could support ten children for a month! What a way to waste my blessings!" Denise's sense of shame led her to deeply reflect on herself.

Moved by the home visits, Denise and her husband started deeply reflecting on what path to take in the future. However, she never expected that Dino would resolutely decide to quite his job. He made this choice after participating in volunteer activities with his wife, inspired by the words of Yang Ming-chin: "There's nothing wrong with being ambitious, but politics is too narrow. There should be better options for you."

With sincerity and perseverance, nothing is difficult

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Although she clearly knew which direction she wanted to go, the economic uncertainty of her husband starting his own business, combined with the pressures from rearing a child, left Denise feeling very troubled. When she brought up the subject with brother Michael, he lightly asked, "How about you set aside one day per week for volunteering, would that work?" She understood that the future of Tzu Chi in Mozambique might rely on her choice. She told herself "If I don't press forward now, everything will go back to the starting point. How then can I hope for any improvement in Mozambique?"



"You must mindfully recruit local volunteers. Going into the community to spread love is a very good way." Brother Michael thoughtfully shared his experiences, and Denise started making efforts to introduce Tzu Chi and the principle of mutually caring for each other as she was doing home visits. However, she soon found that this way was too slow. At that point, she had a flash of inspiration: "We should organize a 'tea party' to introduce Tzu Chi, where we invite everybody to join!" As soon as she expressed this thought, the Durban volunteers responded enthusiastically, and moreover, her local neighbors happily offered a venue for the gathering. In the midst of the preparations, Denise suddenly got scared: "Do I really want to do this? I have never even seen a tea party, how should I do it?"

When Michael Pan heard her worries, he encouraged her: "Just go do it! Don't worry! The volunteers from Durban will help you, they have a lot of experience. You just take it easy!" She would never have imagined that over 100 locals would come to the gathering, filling the venue. The presentations and sharings by the volunteers from Durban deeply moved all the guests, to the point where, after the end of the meeting, many did not want to leave. Squeezing her hands between theirs, they would say "What can we do to become like all of you?" Denise deeply felt that as long as there is a sincere will, there will be a way.

After the success of this activity that she had planned and organized herself, she realized that things were really not as difficult as she had imagined. Even if language and culture might differ, with sincerity and perseverance, it is possible to make an impact. From that day on, she started to recognize herself as a Mozambican. She started treating her neighbors as her own family, and found that people no longer showed doubt or averted their eyes when they saw her. Instead, they would come and hug her warmly and say "You are our family!" These simple and friendly words would make tears rise in Denise's eyes, and made her constantly ask herself: "They are so poor, but although I don't have any material goods to give them, they completely trust me and love me. I really have to press on for their sake!"

Studying to take on more responsibility

In October 2012, Denise came back to Taiwan to participate in the Tzu Chi Global Entrepreneur Seminar in Hualien. When she was chatting with volunteers from the U.S., she expressed her envy of their volunteer environment. The U.S. volunteers responded "You know what? The U.S. is very advanced, but it is difficult to lead the rich on the path of giving. It is we who envy you."

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You have such a gigantic field of blessings to tend in Africa. So make good use of this opportunity!"

These words went directly to her heart. She thought about how difficult it was for her to adapt to her environment in Mozambique, and how she kept giving her husband a difficult time. Even just before she left for the camp, she had a big argument with him. Now, she felt very grateful to him. "It is thanks to him that I came to Mozambique and got to witness suffering. Now, I can make good use of my life in serving those in need."



Her husband had expected that when she came home, she would continue the argument that had started before she left for the camp. He was surprised when, the moment she stepped through the door, she threw herself in his arms and hugged him closely. "Thank you, thank you for your understanding and patience!" From that day on, she was full of gratitude for everything around her. This change in her also affected her husband. One evening, Dino took her hands and earnestly said: "During those days when you were in Taiwan, I was thinking a lot, and even thought about giving up. I couldn't imagine that you would go through such a change. I can see how strongly Tzu Chi has influenced you and the way you really care about this land and its people. So I have decided that I want to help you and work together with you."

Three months later, Dino went back to Taiwan for the South African Tzu Chi Core Group Meeting. During his absence, in January 2013, Mozambique experienced serious flooding. Dino immediately started a fundraising drive on Facebook, and from mid January to the beginning of March, they collected and distributed 15 tons of relief material, and at the same time recruited a number of local volunteers. Denise fondly remembered brother Michael's reminder that "there is no one who can't be saved." "If it hadn't been for Tzu Chi, we wouldn't have had the power to act; if it hadn't been for Tzu Chi, I wouldn't have this connection with the community and such a wealth of love."

In June, 2013, she went with Michael Pan to Hualien to attend the annual board meeting for Tzu Chi branches around the world. For Denise, who is still in training to become a certified Tzu Chi volunteer, the board meeting was a special opportunity to study and emulate the experiences and examples of volunteers in other countries. When she goes back to Mozambique, she wants to shoulder the mission to extend Tzu Chi's work to a wider circle. She said, "I traveled halfway around the world to find a refuge for my heart and spirit, and I can't believe that it is just a coincidence. I want to spur myself harder, and follow Master Cheng Yen's words, 'When we live on other people's land, covered by other people's sky, we must know to give back to that land and its people.' That way, I won't be wasting my human life."

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