

The Fixer

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Many discarded appliances aren't actually broken, according to Tzu Chi volunteer Zhuang Qing-jing. Despite his weakened eyesight, he salvages abandoned appliances and electronic equipment, fixes them up, and tries to make them as good as new. Adding new life to old appliances benefits the environment and adds meaning to each passing day.

Located on the outskirts of Zhanghua in central Taiwan, the Tzu Chi Baobu Recycling Station is surrounded by green rice paddies and vegetable gardens. Against this beautiful, bucolic backdrop, volunteers unload recyclable materials from trucks, sort them into orderly piles, and disassemble appliances and electronics for reusable or recyclable components.

Zhuang Qing-jing (莊慶景) sits at a desk at the station, intently tinkering with a stereo system. Bright sunlight streams through a window and falls on him as he concentrates on his work.

It is not uncommon to find many discarded appliances at this recycling station, either received from donors or collected by recycling volunteers in the neighborhoods. Zhuang discovered early on that many old appliances were repairable or even still in working order. He takes them to his desk and fiddles around with them to see if he can bring them back to life.

He works diligently, and his deftness hides the fact that he suffers from serious handicaps. He is deaf in his left ear and his eyesight is poor. He has to hold things very close to his face just to see them. His ankles and feet are also in constant pain.

Some of his finds are not in bad shape and take only a little tinkering to render them serviceable again. Others require more work. Though some items are truly beyond repair, there are always parts of them that can be salvaged and reused. He never attended school, but he writes simple user instructions to go with the appliances he repairs. Sometimes he adds labels to the buttons if their functions are not immediately clear. Then he prices each appliance.

He also goes through discarded batteries, picks out those that have not rusted, and checks them for any remaining power. If a battery is more than half full, he labels it as such and puts on a price sticker.

After being priced, the items go onto the shelves at the thrift shop on the premises. Zhuang said, "Customers are welcome to check the appliances carefully. I also provide after-sales service." As with regular monetary donations, proceeds from the thrift shop help advance the Tzu Chi missions.

Zhuang recalls how he came to join Tzu Chi. He said that after he retired from his work, a friend took him one day to the Tzu Chi Zhanghua branch and registered his interest in working as a recycling volunteer. A few days later, Sister Zhao Jin-chou (趙金周) called Zhuang back and made all the necessary arrangements for him to start. "On July 23, 2005, I went to the Ziqiang recycling station for the first time. On that very day, I rode out on a truck and helped pick up

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recyclables from collection points,” Zhuang recalled, his memory of the day still vivid.

One day he went to southern Taiwan with other volunteers to visit a recycling station in Kaohsiung. He noticed that the microphone the volunteer was using to guide them was not working well. Asking about it, he discovered that the stereo system and microphones at the recycling station had all been reclaimed from trash.

He had always been drawn to electric appliances, and he had a good grasp of the basic principles of audio equipment. He enjoyed fixing these things. In this way, he found an area in which his interests and talents could contribute to Tzu Chi. He decided to give their recycled stereo systems and appliances a thorough makeover. In 2008, when the Baobu recycling station opened, he started reporting there regularly to repair anything electric or even electronic.

These days, he splits his time between the Ziqiang and Baobu recycling stations. On Mondays and Fridays, he goes to Ziqiang in search of appliances that look or feel fixable. On Tuesdays and Thursdays he spends his time at Baobu repairing salvaged items. When asked how he had overcome the roadblocks presented by his weakened eyesight or his lack of schooling, he said confidently, “Nobody taught me how these things worked. I just have to be determined and figure it out by myself. I learn by trial and error. By doing it often enough, I kind of get the hang of it.” He added that although keys or buttons on many appliances are in English, he figures out what their functions are after pressing them a few times.

His involvement with the repairs has given new life to many appliances, but more importantly, also to himself.

Years ago, he worked at an electroplating factory where he was required to wear high rubber boots all day long. Harsh chemical fluids in the factory often found their way inside his boots without his knowing it. Over time, the area near his ankles began to ulcerate. He has been through three skin transplant operations and all kinds of therapy, all to no avail. The skin there remains unhealed and very painful. He needs painkillers every day for relief. Some days the pain is so bad he needs a walking stick just to limp along.

Zhuang said, regarding his physical misery, “If I hadn’t become Master Cheng Yen’s disciple and a Tzu Chi volunteer, I would have just stayed home feeling sorry for myself. But I am now the Master’s disciple. I know and accept the karmic law of cause and effect, so I view my physical suffering as a result of things I did in my past lives.” Thus, instead of dwelling on his pain or wasting his breath complaining about his disabilities, he focuses on doing his work at the recycling station. “I thank the Buddha for giving me this opportunity to contribute what little I can.”

“My repairs help give otherwise useless audio equipment new life,” Zhuang said. “Not only that, the revived equipment can then be used to play Tzu Chi songs and the Master’s lectures. Visitors and volunteers alike benefit from those nurturing and uplifting messages.” He regards the recycling station as a place for spiritual cultivation for everyone there, not just himself.

Zhuang’s dedication to his repair work is inspirational. Zeng Han-yi (曾漢宜), a fellow volunteer,

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said, “When my kidney stones act up, I can’t do anything at all, much less work here. But look at Brother Zhuang—he is officially severely handicapped and in constant pain, yet he hobbles about and works here all the time. I admire his fortitude. He is a great example for me to follow.”

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