

慈濟

# Tzu Chi

## Buddhism in Action

Fundación Budista Tzu Chi de Taiwán en Argentina  
台灣佛教慈濟基金會阿根廷聯絡處



### Love Endures

Tzu Chi's Anti-Coronavirus  
Efforts in 2020



**Syrian refugee children at El Menahil International School donate money to help victims of an earthquake that hit Hualien, eastern Taiwan, in 2018. For several years now, children at the school have responded warmly to Tzu Chi's fundraising campaigns.**

YU ZI-CHENG

# The Power of a Giving Heart

Translated by Teresa Chang

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I set out from Hualien in early November 2020 for the first round of our year-end blessing ceremonies. I visited northern and central Taiwan, then returned to Hualien on December 6. I met many loving people during this month-long trip, and heard many stories of selfless giving. Some people shared how they had emerged from a difficult past after encountering Tzu Chi, and decided to break free from a small world dominated by personal concerns to embark on a path defined by the all-embracing love of a bodhisattva.

Everything I heard and saw during this trip spoke of such beauty that no words can fully capture. In a blessing ceremony in Taichung, volunteers from Nantou shared the story of Cao Meiying (曹美英). After retiring as a teacher, Cao volunteered for our foundation for over 20 years before passing away on November 11. Upon her death, she fulfilled her wish of donating her body to Tzu Chi for medical education.

Cao had said on her death bed that she would follow me life after life on the Bodhisattva Path. Seeing her images in a video in the ceremony, I felt a profound sense of loss. At the same time, however, I knew she had lived a most beautiful life. She was unwavering in her commitment to do good for the world, even after being diagnosed with cancer. Examples like hers have been plentiful in Tzu Chi's 55-year history. The dedication of these volunteers has given me tremendous strength.

I often say I have lived a life without regrets. I founded Tzu Chi 55 years ago after I saw how poverty and other forms of suffering abounded in this world. I really wanted to do something to help. I was living in Hualien at the time. My master (Dharma Master Yin Shun) hoped I could move to Chiayi, but a group of people in Hualien who often listened to me expound the Dharma asked me to stay. I told them staying in Hualien would only be meaningful if they assisted me in doing charity work. So, just like that, 30 housewives began dropping 50 Taiwanese cents (1.2 U.S. cents) into a bamboo bank every day before going to the market. The money would be used to

help the needy. Tzu Chi's charity work was thus launched.

Fifty cents might not seem much, but when many 50 cents are put together, a lot of things can be done. Starting with a handful of housewives each saving a little of their grocery money every day, Tzu Chi has now grown into an international charity organization with branch offices in 63 countries and regions. Our footprints of care can be found in 119 countries.

Everyone, no matter how poor, can help others. The Syrian refugee children at El Menahil International School (established in Turkey by Tzu Chi and the government of the Sultangazi district of Istanbul) serve as a good example. For several years now, students there have donated what pocket money they could to help with Tzu Chi's disaster relief operations. Even those with no money to spare show their love in other ways. One child, for instance, wrote "a one dollar check" on a sheet of paper to donate. Though he had no money to give, he had a giving heart. That heart to give is what matters the most, and is profoundly moving.

My heart to give 55 years ago was like that child's, and I have held firm to that original aspiration ever since. My heart might grow heavy whenever I see suffering in the world, but I'm filled with a renewed sense of hope and purpose when I see Tzu Chi volunteers around the world working together with one heart to relieve that suffering.

If I had not acted on my desire to help the needy 55 years ago, if I had not tried to pool together people's love, we would not have been able to help so many people over the years. What matters even more than the concrete aid we have given is the love we have inspired in those we have helped. That love has prompted them to help even more people.

Let us all do our best to create blessings every day by doing good. Our life may become shorter with each passing day, but if we keep on doing good, our blessings will continue to grow. Please be ever more mindful. ❀

# Tzu Chi

Bimonthly

January 2021



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To bring peace to the world, we must first cultivate ourselves.

**ON THE COVER** In mid-August 2020, medical supplies donated by Tzu Chi arrived at Hospital Muñiz, a public hospital in Buenos Aires, Argentina, specializing in treating infectious diseases.

PHOTO BY ZHONG GUI-MAN

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The *Tzu Chi Bimonthly* welcomes contributions of personal experiences or reports of Tzu Chi activities. We also welcome letters to the editor containing personal comments or opinions on matters of interest in the Tzu Chi world. We reserve the right to edit the letters for purposes of space, time or clarity. Letters should include the writer's name, address and telephone number.

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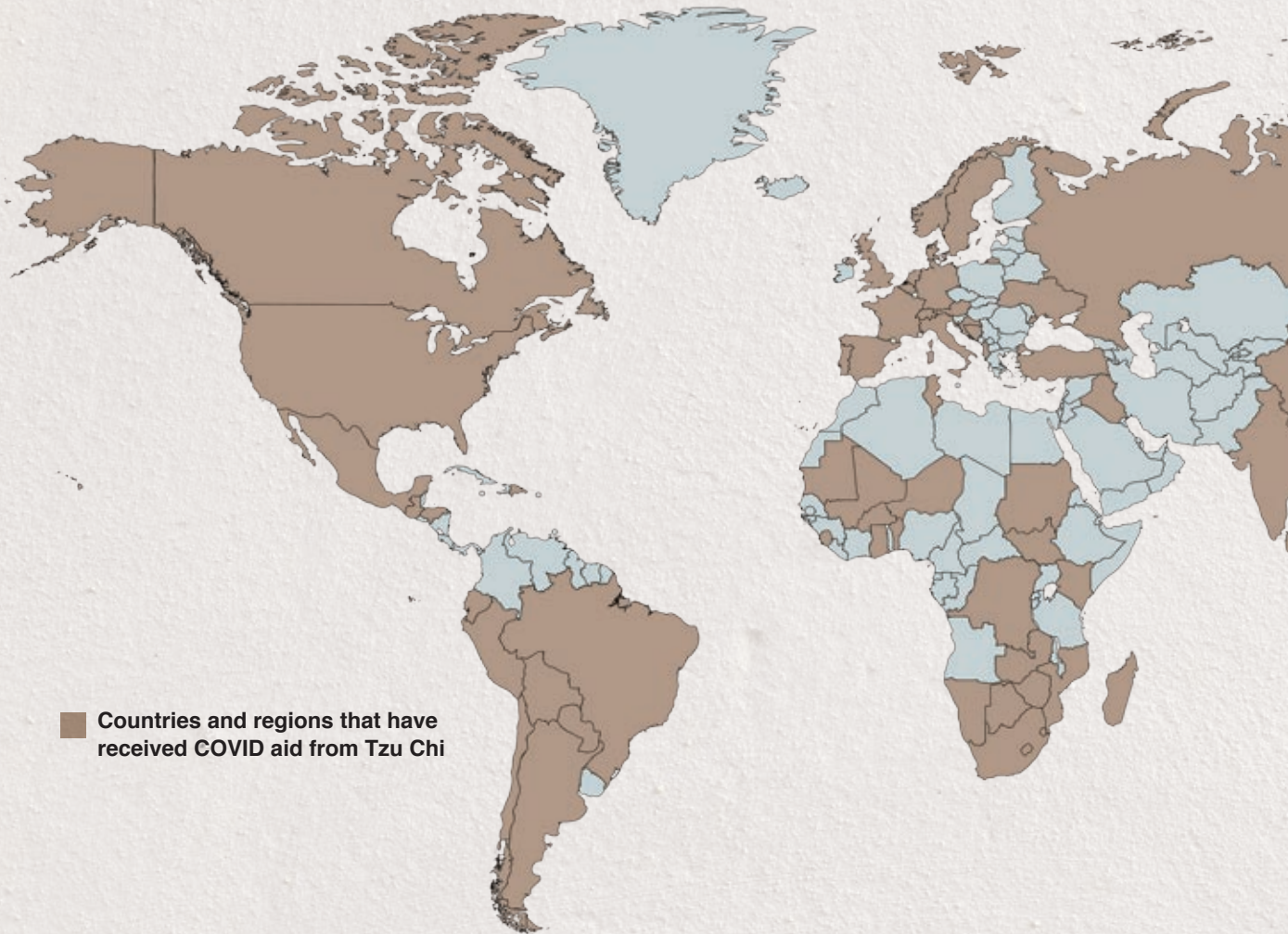
# Love Endures

## Tzu Chi's Anti-Coronavirus Efforts in 2020

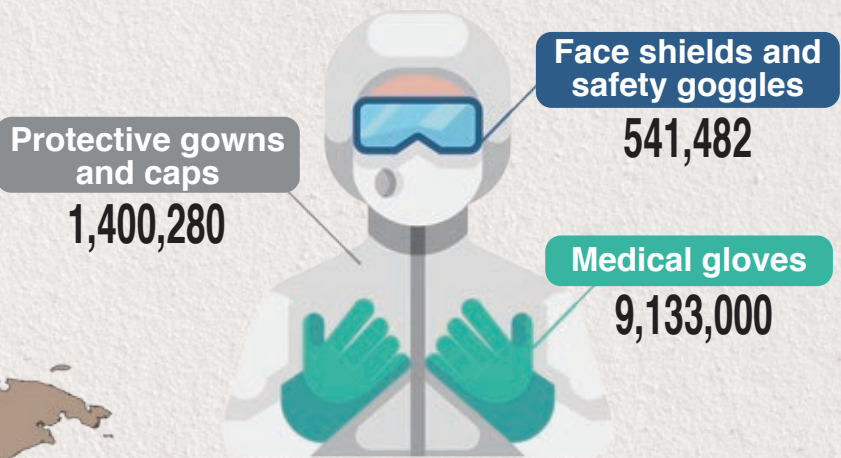
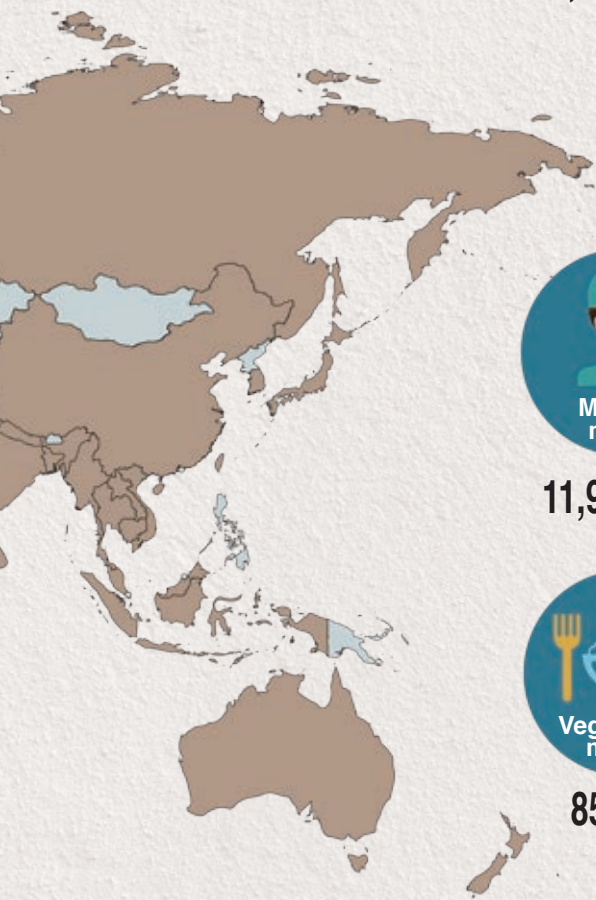
By Ye Zi-hao

Edited and translated by Wu Hsiao-ting

*No corner of the world has escaped the fallout from COVID-19. As a result, the scope of aid provided by Tzu Chi in response has been unprecedented for the foundation, spanning countries across five continents. In addition to donating personal protective equipment, Tzu Chi has provided food and daily necessities to the needy to help them weather the financial hardship wrought by the crisis. Despite the unprecedented global crises and the countless challenges the pandemic has produced, one thing is certain: love has endured.*



**As of December 22, 2020, Tzu Chi had provided COVID aid to 87 countries and regions around the world.**



11,951,664



297,751



50,748 liters



85,561



5,175



69,049

**C**OVID-19 has ravaged countries the world over. The death toll as of mid-December 2020 stood at a staggering 1.6 million. Fifteen countries by the same time had registered over a million cases, include the United States, India, Brazil, Russia, and France. Infections and deaths aside, the coronavirus has devastated economies around the globe. No nation has been left untouched by the pandemic and its fallout.

The Tzu Chi Foundation has been involved from the very beginning of the pandemic, bringing help to those impacted. On January 26, 2020, when most people in Taiwan were still celebrating Chinese New Year, an anti-coronavirus team was formed at Tzu Chi headquarters in Hualien, eastern Taiwan. Foundation personnel and volunteers in Taiwan and abroad began coordinating and organizing the purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE) to send to areas with outbreaks. As the infection spread beyond China and lockdowns and other measures were implemented by countries to contain the virus, volunteers in many nations launched relief programs to help people financially hurt by the outbreak. The foundation also launched a global daily prayer event to pray for blessings for the world. They called upon people to adopt a vegetarian diet as a show of sincere piety and to help dispel disasters.

Tzu Chi's COVID aid reached more than 85 countries, spread across the five continents of Asia, Oceania, the Americas, Africa, and Europe. A relief project of this scale would not have been possible without the work and cooperation of many people, especially as lockdowns and movement restrictions made everything more difficult to carry out. Despite the difficulties, volunteers stayed the course, enabling the love of Tzu Chi donors to reach many vulnerable populations around the world. Tzu Chi's efforts to help people make it through the pandemic have continued into 2021 as well.

### Getting the aid out

The coronavirus was first detected in China near the end of 2019, and until February 2020, most of the infections were concentrated there. The highly infectious disease made medical masks a daily necessity in areas hit hard by the virus. Demand soon outran supply in China, and even those with money couldn't obtain masks. A shortage of masks occurred in Taiwan too, especially after the first coronavirus case was diagnosed on the island on January 21, 2020. The Taiwanese government responded to the shortage by banning the export of



medical masks, taking control of and ramping up domestic mask production, and establishing a rationing system.

Because of the government's ban on exporting medical masks, Tzu Chi Taiwan couldn't send any medical masks abroad to help those in harder-hit areas. Instead, Tzu Chi volunteers in Indonesia, America, and other places took it upon themselves to purchase medical masks, protective clothing, disinfectant alcohol, and other essential items in their countries and send the supplies to China.

By April, domestic transmissions in China had largely been brought under control, and the country's ability to produce anti-coronavirus medical supplies began to increase. At the same time, Europe, the Americas, and Southeast Asia were seeing a surge in infections and a spike in demand for protective gear. The flow of medical supplies





was thus reversed—from China to other countries.

Tzu Chi volunteers in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong Province and the largest city in southern China, formed a team to purchase medical supplies in China for the foundation's global COVID aid project. Tang Weiliang (唐惟良), a Tzu Chi staffer on that team, recalled that hectic period when they had to work like mad to obtain PPE to send to heavily impacted countries. The pandemic had already severely strained the global supply of PPE, making the purchase of protective gear a real challenge. When he wasn't on the phone looking for suppliers, he was getting ready to make another call. Though the team was in Guangzhou, the suppliers they found were not confined to that city or even Guangdong Province—some were as far as in the northeast part of China.

**A chartered jet from the Philippines arrived at Guangzhou, China, in late April 2020 to bring back personal protective equipment donated by Tzu Chi. The PPE was to protect frontline medical workers in the Philippines.**

LI HONG-LI

Tang's team was not the only one mobilized for the purchasing project. "We relied a lot on the volunteers spread across China to pull off our mission," said Tang. "They visited manufacturers in their cities to carry out on-site inspections, talked things over with the manufacturers, and checked out the quality of the goods we had ordered."

Volunteers had to work hard to obtain much needed medical supplies, but that was only half the battle. Once the goods had been procured, getting them out was another challenge. Flights leaving

China for other countries had been sharply reduced due to pandemic-related border closures. Volunteer Zhang Ling (張玲) said that one of the things she was most afraid of hearing during that time was that “there were no available flights or cabin spaces [for them to book to send out the supplies].”

Even when flights were available, there was no guarantee that medical supplies could be loaded on board in time to be flown out. China’s customs policies on the export of medical supplies were changed several times after the outbreak of the coronavirus to tighten the control and inspection of medical goods leaving China. Goods waiting for inspection and clearance were backed up due to the tighter controls; it was taking things forever to get through customs. As a result, it sometimes happened that a shipment of goods prepared by the volunteers missed the flight they had booked.

In addition to air freight, maritime transport was another way to get the goods out. On the evening of May 7, 2020, a hundred ventilators purchased by Tzu Chi were being loaded into a shipping container to be delivered to Indonesia. But due to lack of experience, the volunteers taking care of the shipment found to their dismay that the shipping container was only large enough to hold 84 ventilators. This was a real dilemma; the volunteers had already filed the customs declaration for the shipment, indicating the container contained a hundred units. A hundred ventilators had to be loaded into the designated shipping container, no more nor less.

“We had no other way out that night,” said volunteer Fu Jinhua (傅金花). “I was so anxious I was on the verge of tears.” She tried to calm herself down and worked with other volunteers to solve the problem. After making careful measurements, they decided to remove the shipping pallets on which the ventilators were stacked and reload everything into the container. But that presented another problem: without the pallets, it would be impossible to use a forklift to reload them. The volunteers ended up having to move the ventilators back into the container by hand. It was no easy task, as each ventilator weighed 40 kilograms (88 pounds). Fortunately, they finished everything in time for the container—containing exactly a hundred ventilators, no more nor less—to be shipped.

Though challenges like these were numerous during Tzu Chi’s COVID aid project, volunteers and staffers managed to overcome them, one by one. They did their best knowing they were taking part in a meaningful and significant mission, a mission that would save lives.



### 5000 kilometers of benevolence

“At the end of January [2020], we at Tzu Chi Indonesia purchased anti-coronavirus supplies and sent them to China,” said Liu Su-mei (劉素美), CEO of Tzu Chi Indonesia. “We also sent some masks to Taiwan.” But when the COVID-19 situation took a turn in March and infections started to rise in Indonesia, “we immediately purchased large amounts of medical supplies [from China] to help protect domestic healthcare workers. As soon as the COVID-19 test kits we had purchased arrived, Indonesia’s Minister of Health personally visited our office in Jakarta to receive some of them [for distribution to medical facilities in the nation].”



Almost all medical institutions around the world at that time were facing a shortage of PPE. Some doctors and nurses resorted to wearing raincoats or plastic bags to protect themselves from the virus. “I was thrilled and proud [to be a member of Tzu Chi] when I learned from our volunteer group chat that Tzu Chi and businesspeople in Indonesia were working together to raise a billion NT dollars [US\$33,550,400] to buy protective gear to safeguard healthcare professionals in Indonesia,” said volunteer Wang Hui-jiao (王惠嬌) in that nation. More than a hundred companies contributed to the fundraising campaign in the end, enabling it to reach its goal in a short time. Wang

**The Tzu Chi Kuala Lumpur and Selangor branch in Malaysia purchased 6,000,000 medical gloves in February 2020 to send to Wuhan, the city in China where the novel coronavirus started. Tzu Chi volunteers worked 500 shifts to help the manufacturer package the gloves so that the goods could be sent out sooner.**

DAI HUI DA

said that the success of the campaign showed how much the participating entrepreneurs trusted Tzu Chi.

The Indonesian government imposed large-scale social restrictions to stem the virus on April

10, 2020. Soon thereafter, volunteers began to notice how the precautionary measures were impacting the local economy and pushing low-income families deeper into poverty. In response, volunteers decided to distribute boxes of daily necessities to the underprivileged to help them weather the crisis. Based on local income levels, volunteers established that each box of necessities was valued at 8.30 U.S. dollars and invited everyone to chip in to help out. Even people of modest means could contribute by sharing the cost of a box of goods.

Indonesia's anti-coronavirus aid mission covered more than 5,000 kilometers (3,106 miles)—from Aceh, the westernmost province, to Papua, the nation's easternmost province. By early December 2020, the mission had benefited 1,404 medical facilities and other organizations and more than 424,000 needy families.

"When our donors saw Tzu Chi donating anti-coronavirus supplies to hospitals and daily necessities to the needy," Wang said cheerfully, "they knew they had made the right decision to donate to our foundation."

The large-scale aid project organized by Tzu Chi Indonesia attracted a lot of attention. For example, Birgaldo Sinaga, a Christian internet celebrity in Indonesia, donated 165 U.S. dollars to the foundation to help with the COVID project. One hundred sixty-five U.S. dollars is not a small sum in Indonesia. He has a fan base of 200,000, and he posted his receipt for the donation on his social media platform afterwards. This generated a lot of buzz. Sinaga also posted Tzu Chi donation receipts from his fans to encourage more people to join in and donate to the cause.

### Stepping up to the plate

The Philippines was also hit hard by the pandemic. The Philippine government implemented a lockdown in mid-March 2020, pushing the lives of impoverished people even closer to the edge. According to Henry Yunez (楊國英), CEO of Tzu Chi Philippines: "The government recognized that people needed help during this time and distributed aid accordingly, but the money and

**Medical workers at Clinica Gatchalian Hospital in Ormoc, in the province of Leyte, the Philippines, pose with a hand-written sign to thank Dharma Master Cheng Yen for donating medical masks, isolation gowns, and other personal protective equipment to the hospital.**

BELEN VELASQUE





goods were only enough to last each recipient family a few days. Many people didn't receive any aid at all."

Tzu Chi volunteers deeply sympathized with the plight of the people struggling to get by, and decided to distribute rice to prevent them from going hungry. But giving out rice was easier said

than done during a time like the pandemic. The lockdown had brought many business activities to a standstill, making it difficult for volunteers to purchase the massive amount of rice needed for the distribution. It was also a challenge to find people to drive the trucks enlisted by Tzu Chi to transport the rice. Volunteers made countless phone calls day



and night before eventually solving the supply and transportation problems.

An even greater challenge was that the government had forbidden citizens over 60 from leaving their homes as part of the COVID-19 travel restrictions. This was to protect people in that age bracket, considered high-risk, from coronavirus infec-

tion. Though well-intentioned, the order compounded the difficulty of Tzu Chi's rice distribution project because many experienced Tzu Chi volunteers were in that age bracket.

Fortunately, volunteers in the Philippines had, by dint of decades of work in the nation, inspired many young and middle-aged people to join their ranks to serve the needy. When these younger volunteers learned how the government order had added to the difficulty of the distribution project, they stepped up to the plate and said they'd do their best to help.

Volunteers subsequently launched the distributions with the help of the military, the police, and barangay leaders. (A barangay is the smallest administrative division in the Philippines.) Each distribution was limited to a maximum of 2,000 families. People who worked the events were required to wear masks and gloves on-site. Marks were made on the ground at regular intervals for social distancing.

The first distribution took place in Tatalon, a barangay in Quezon City. As the event progressed, the crowd grew larger and larger, eventually making social distancing impossible. After inquiry, it was discovered that some in the crowd were from other communities and not on the recipient rosters for the distribution that day.

"We can't go on like this," the barangay leader said to Tzu Chi volunteers. "We're breaking the rules." Volunteers responded by calling a halt to the event. They asked those who were not on the rosters to go home and wait for the distributions that would be held in their communities later. When the crowd thinned out a bit, the event was able to proceed.

Volunteer Zhuang Li-yuan (莊黎媛) said that the purpose of the distributions was to help people through the pandemic and bring a sense of stability to their disrupted lives. If order could not be maintained at an event and rules not followed, the distributions, instead of helping, might exacerbate infection rates in communities and make things worse. Thankfully, people at following distribu-



**Indonesian military personnel get ready to set off from a military facility in Semanan, Kalideres, West Jakarta, in late September 2020 to deliver Tzu Chi-supplied daily necessities to needy families. Like in other countries, movement restrictions have hurt the economy and killed jobs in Indonesia. Tzu Chi Indonesia started a relief plan to help tide the underserved over the pandemic.**

KHUSNUL KHOTIMAH

tions generally followed volunteers' guidance, stuck to the circulation routes set up on-site, and observed social distance regulations the best they could. Everyone's cooperation made it a lot easier for volunteers to pull off the events.

Another distribution was held in the barangay of Pulpogan, in Cebu. The community had a high crime rate and was referred to as a "black area" by locals. Volunteer Hong Li-qiong (洪麗瓊) explained: "Most residents there work as wharf laborers or tricycle drivers. Their incomes are minimal. The pandemic must have presented a real challenge to them."

Confirmed infections in Pulpogan prompted the government to establish tight controls on people entering and leaving the district. Therefore, local volunteers and students receiving tuition aid from Tzu Chi were put in charge of conducting the distribution. Volunteers had worked in the area for five years, and though the students were young, residents looked upon them as Tzu Chi representa-

tives and so showed regard for them during the distribution. The students did a good job, impressing Hong, who called them the potential new blood of Tzu Chi. The two-day event, which took place in early May 2020, ran smoothly. More than 3,300 impoverished households benefited.

Just a stretch of sea away from Cebu is Bohol, where volunteers focused their aid mainly on underprivileged people who hadn't received government aid. Bags of rice, each weighing 25 kilograms (55 pounds), were transported to the main island of Bohol, and some were then further ferried to smaller outlying islands. "We launched a distribution there without expecting how much we would be able to achieve," volunteer James Chua (蔡青山) said. "Who could have predicted that our aid would end up reaching all 47 villages in Bohol!"

The Philippines were hit by a series of major natural disasters in 2019, followed by a volcanic eruption near Manila in January 2020. Then the





pandemic broke out. Tzu Chi volunteers in the nation worked ceaselessly to raise donations to help those impacted by these events, but by the time they decided to launch the rice distribution for people impacted by COVID-19, they only had enough money left to help 60,000 families. “When Master Cheng Yen learned of our situation,” said CEO Henry Yunez, “she instructed us not to let the lack of money hinder our efforts. She said that our headquarters in Taiwan would support us. That was really a big shot in the arms for us.”

With the help of volunteers in Taiwan and from around the world, Tzu Chi Philippines was able to expand the scale of their aid project. Even remote islands at the southernmost end of the nation, where Muslim populations were dominant, received rice from Tzu Chi transported all the way from Manila. By the end of October 2020, Tzu Chi had distributed 143,000 bags of rice in the Philippines, benefiting over 130,000 families.



## No time to lose

The Americas and Europe have experienced some of the worst outbreaks of COVID-19 in the world. Volunteers there first made cloth masks and gave them away to help protect the health of local community residents. Then, when Tzu Chi-supplied medical items such as protective clothing, ventilators, and surgical masks were delivered, volunteers collected the shipments at airports and quickly arranged to have them rushed to hospitals and nursing facilities. Each delivery was like a race against the Grim Reaper.

Xie Zhen-xiang (謝禎祥), a Tzu Chi volunteer in Bolivia, South America, arrived at an international airport in Santa Cruz, the largest city in Bolivia, on May 13, 2020, to collect a shipment of anti-coronavirus supplies. Reporters from news outlets were on-site to cover the story. The arrival of the medical supplies and equipment donated by Tzu Chi was a rare piece of uplifting news in the nation since the coronavirus had hit there two months earlier.

The shipment of supplies was immediately sent to five hospitals. Some of the supplies arrived at one of the hospitals at midnight, not a moment too soon for some patients. A very sick, elderly woman was sitting in a wheelchair, a medical device next to her indicating that her blood oxygen saturation level was below 80 percent, dangerously low. She was quickly connected to one of the ventilators donated by Tzu Chi. “Within 30 minutes, her oxygen level had risen to above 90 percent,” said volunteer Xie Zhen-xiang. “We saved her life!”

Xie thanked Master Cheng Yen and Tzu Chi volunteers around the world for helping save lives in Bolivia.

Medical supplies and equipment can help save lives, but food and other daily necessities are just as important for families struggling to survive the economic hard times triggered by the pandemic.

Nearly half of the residents of Wilmington, a neighborhood in Los Angeles, California, are first generation immigrants from Latin America. Low-income households comprise one fourth of the families in that area. Tzu Chi has worked with local Catholic churches and community shelters to distribute essential supplies to underserved people there on a regular basis since 1998. The service con-

**Tzu Chi volunteers in the Philippines distributed rice to residents of Marikina in mid-April 2020. Participants wore masks and observed social distance to decrease the chance of spreading the virus.**

COURTESY OF TZU CHI PHILIPPINES

tinued even during the pandemic.

One such distribution was held on June 20, 2020, with precautionary measures duly taken. During the event, Maria Maderna, a Wilmington resident, shared with Tzu Chi volunteers some text messages she had received. The messages were from her landlord demanding outstanding rental payments. Maderna's husband had died of leukemia, and she was raising three children alone. Adding insult to injury, she was also diagnosed with breast cancer. Even though the government had banned the eviction of tenants for unpaid rent during the COVID-19 pandemic, Maderna was still finding it hard to get by. She had no choice but to come to the distribution to pick up food.

Unable to pay rent, no money to buy food—examples like Maderna's abounded in the Wilmington community. Even so, some needy people there still did what they could to help others; they knew there were people worse off than they were. Gloria Barraco brought two full coin banks to the distribution to donate to Tzu Chi. She and her sisters had been receiving daily necessities from the foundation for years, and were paying forward the

**Tzu Chi volunteers in Bolivia conducted a distribution in Montero, Santa Cruz, on September 29, 2020, to help underprivileged families impacted by COVID-19. Each household received 37 kilograms of supplies.**

COURTESY OF XIE ZHEN-XIANG AND SHI QIAN-RU

love they had received by donating to Tzu Chi to help other needy people. Though what they could donate wasn't much, their kind gesture was particularly uplifting during the challenging time of the pandemic.

### **Bringing hope to the desperate in Africa**

Providing aid during the coronavirus pandemic is not an easy undertaking. Tzu Chi volunteers in South Africa have enlisted outside help, including that of many organizations, to allow Tzu Chi's aid to reach more needy people.

A warm-hearted medical doctor, with the assistance of his friends in the medical field, helped Tzu Chi donate anti-coronavirus supplies to more than 20 large hospitals. Working with over 150 non-government organizations, volunteers completed 250 distributions in the province of Gauteng, benefiting more than 20,000 families. Tzu Chi has cared for 150 visually impaired people in Soweto, near Johannesburg, for more than 20 years. In order to allow Tzu Chi-supplied food to reach these people during the pandemic, Emmanuel Group, a member of the Tzu Chi Collegiate Association, made hundreds of phone calls in two weeks to get hold of them. Even so, he still couldn't reach them all. It wasn't until he obtained the help of a local community leader that Tzu Chi was able to get food and other daily necessities to these underserved people.

In Zimbabwe, another country in Africa, the





lockdowns imposed to contain the virus interrupted the flow of goods. Prices more than doubled as a result. Tzu Chi volunteers distributed food, blankets, folding beds, and soap to help impoverished people through the crisis. They also drilled wells to help people access clean water.

“Walking long distances to fetch water during the pandemic can pose a serious problem,” said Tino Chu (朱金財), head of Tzu Chi Zimbabwe. When he found out that residents of Domboshava, a village in the province of Mashonaland East, were having difficulty obtaining clean water, he decided to take action to help.

The only serviceable well in the village was located in a cemetery, but even this well didn’t provide much water. To get water clean enough to drink, local women had to leave their homes at three in the morning to fetch water at the well. Since the well didn’t provide much water, if they arrived there too late, the water was too muddy to drink.

Chu found a professional team to drill two wells in Domboshava. Villagers came to help when they learned of the project. Everyone cheered when the drilling machine broke into the earth and water began gushing out. The two wells were completed in five days. Naison Banda, a local resident who

**An inauguration ceremony was held on June 9, 2020, for two wells Tzu Chi Zimbabwe drilled in Domboshava, Mashonaland East, to help people in the village have easier access to clean water. A steady, easily available supply of clean water is important in a time like the pandemic.** HLENGISILE JIYANE

attended the inauguration ceremony for the wells, said, “I’m really happy today. Everyone says we need to wash our hands often during the pandemic, but we can’t do that without water!”

● In December 2020, the United Kingdom became the first Western country to inoculate members of its public against COVID-19 with an authorized vaccine. Vaccinations began in the United States soon thereafter. The good news brought hope to a world reeling from the health and economic impacts of the coronavirus. Let’s all pray for the arrival of the day when the battle against the infection is won. But until that day comes, Tzu Chi volunteers will continue to relieve the plight of needy people and help them ride out the impact from the disease. ❁

# Asia & Oceania



The Tzu Chi Foundation has provided anti-coronavirus supplies and other aid, such as food and daily necessities, to 27 countries and regions in Asia and Oceania to help them weather COVID-19. The countries printed in black below received anti-coronavirus supplies, while those highlighted in brown received a combination of anti-coronavirus supplies and other forms of aid:

- American Samoa, Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Japan, Jordan, Laos, Lebanon, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, New Zealand, the Philippines, Saipan, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, and Vietnam**

## Myanmar



MWO WAIKYAW

From April to September 2020, Tzu Chi volunteers in Myanmar provided food items to 40,676 farming and underprivileged families to help them ride out the economic challenges posed by the coronavirus. The photo here shows volunteers delivering rice and cooking oil to Kungyangon, a township in Yangon Region, on September 26. Each family received 48 kilograms (106 pounds) of rice and two liters (0.5 gallons) of cooking oil, enough to last each household for a month.

## Thailand



PINTICHA JANSUSRI

On August 20, 2020, Tzu Chi Thailand distributed daily necessities to students who had been affected by COVID-19 in Bang Kruai District, Nonthaburi Province. From April to August, volunteers provided 54,839 underserved families in seven provinces with daily necessities. Tzu Chi Thailand launched a second phase of aid in September, continuing its efforts to help people through this difficult time.





## Vietnam



WEN TIAN-LIANG

Volunteers guide some unsighted people in District 1 of Ho Chi Minh City to a distribution venue. Tzu Chi Vietnam worked with the Ho Chi Minh City Union of Friendship Organizations to distribute food, cloth masks, and cash (one million dong [US\$43] for each recipient) to more than 2,000 people with physical disabilities or visual impairments in May and June 2020. These people generally earn a living by making handicrafts, selling lottery tickets, providing massage services, or singing. The measures implemented by the government to contain COVID-19 had badly hurt their livelihoods.



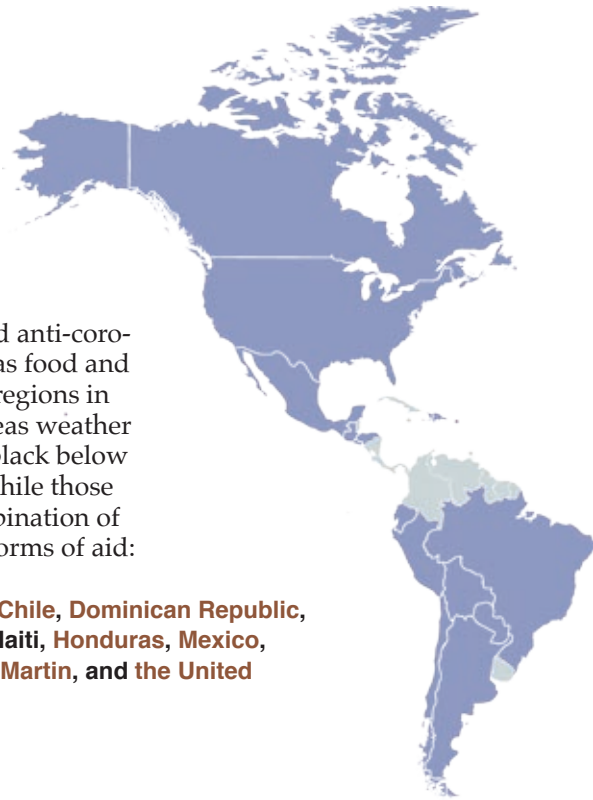
## Malaysia



KONG TECK NGIE

Malaysia saw a resurgence in coronavirus infections in October 2020, straining the capacity of hospitals. In response, the government converted a sports center in Sandakan, Sabah, to house low-risk patients. Tzu Chi volunteers helped set up 200 beds there at the request of the Duchess of Kent Hospital.

# The Americas



The Tzu Chi Foundation has provided anti-coronavirus supplies and other aid, such as food and daily necessities, to 17 countries and regions in the Americas to help people in the areas weather COVID-19. The countries printed in black below received anti-coronavirus supplies, while those highlighted in brown received a combination of anti-coronavirus supplies and other forms of aid:

**Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Saint Martin, and the United States**



## Haiti



COURTESY OF TZU CHI USA

A rice distribution was held for more than 1,500 students attending the Little Schools of Father Bohnen (Oeuvre Des Petites Ecoles de Pere Bohnen) in Port-au-Prince on October 1, 2020, the first day of a new semester after a three-month-long summer break. Students held up signs reading “Thank you, Master Cheng Yen” and “Thank you, Tzu Chi” after the distribution. Face masks were also distributed during the event.

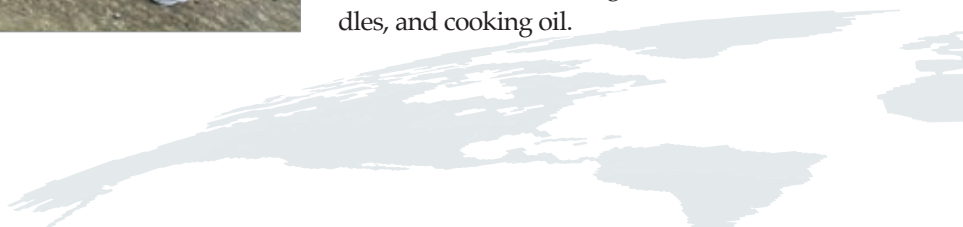


## Ecuador



COURTESY OF TZU CHI ECUADOR

Many underprivileged families in Ecuador struggled to get by after COVID-19 related restrictions were put in place. Tzu Chi volunteers carried out large-scale food distributions in Canoa, Portoviejo, Santa Ana, and Manta to help low-income families survive this difficult time. Each family received eight kinds of food, including rice, corn flour, noodles, and cooking oil.





## The United States



JIANG SHAN-SHAN

Poverty and chronic illness are prevalent in the Bangladeshi community in New York City, making them particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus, especially when compared with communities of other Asian immigrants. In May 2020, Tzu Chi volunteers started providing fresh produce and other food items to Bangladeshi immigrants in the city to help increase their nutritional intake and boost their immunity.



## Paraguay



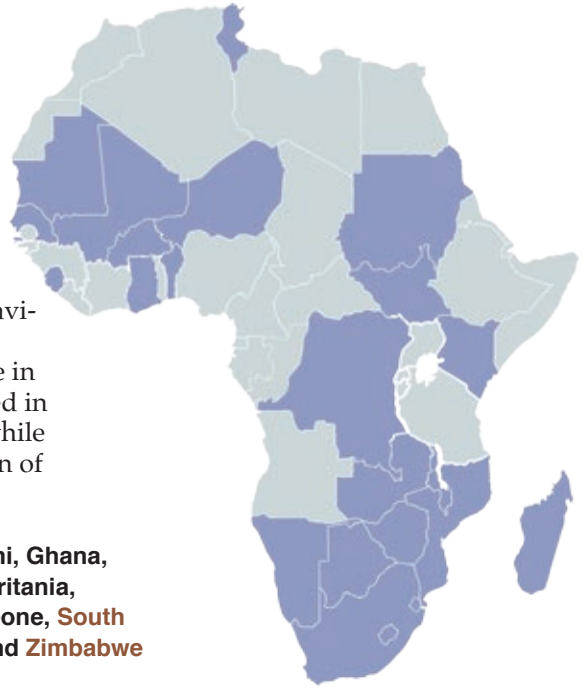
SILVIO AYALA MEJIA

Despite the pandemic, Tzu Chi volunteers in Ciudad del Este continue to hold monthly distributions for the foundation's long-term aid recipients. Volunteers work hard to deliver daily necessities to needy households during this challenging time. They've even prepared medicine and nutritional supplements for families with sick children.

# Africa

The Tzu Chi Foundation has provided anti-coronavirus supplies and other aid, such as food and daily necessities, to 23 countries in Africa to help people in the areas weather COVID-19. The countries printed in black below received anti-coronavirus supplies, while those highlighted in brown received a combination of anti-coronavirus supplies and other forms of aid:

- Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Congo, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, **Lesotho**, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, **Mozambique**, Namibia, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, **South Africa**, South Sudan, Sudan, Tunisia, Zambia, and **Zimbabwe**



## Sierra Leone

COURTESY OF DON BOSCO FAMBUL



Tzu Chi donated personal protective equipment to 20 medical facilities in Sierra Leone to help the country fight the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic situation in the nation improved after the first half of 2020, but then flooding ensued as a result of the rainy season. Tzu Chi worked with its partners in Sierra Leone to deliver rice, multigrain powder mix, and buckets for hand-washing to Ebola survivors and social welfare institutions. A girl under the care of Don Bosco Fambul, a non-profit organization in Freetown, is pictured here holding up a message to thank Tzu Chi for donating food to Don Bosco.

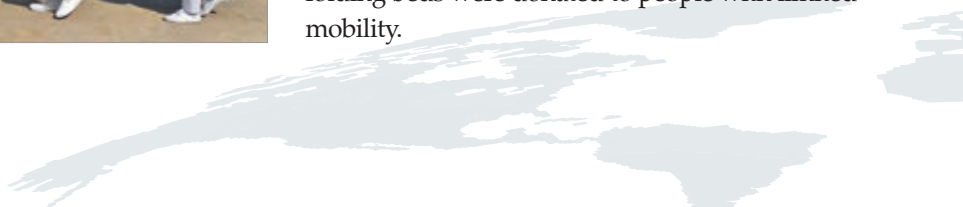


## Zimbabwe

HLENGISILE JIVANE



The Zimbabwe government extended its lockdown measures again in mid-May 2020, making lives more difficult for some impoverished people who didn't have the ability to stock up on food. Tzu Chi volunteers responded by delivering rice and cooking oil to needy families to prevent them from going hungry. Volunteers also started a hot meal program in Epworth, Harare Province, to serve food to orphans. In addition to food aid, folding beds were donated to people with limited mobility.







## Eswatini



COURTESY OF TZU CHI ESWATINI

Volunteers in Eswatini cultivate farmland to grow vegetables, and have set up more than 60 hot meal stations to feed local needy people. Meals are provided one to three times a week at the stations. These stations have been especially important during the pandemic, as they help keep hungry children fed. Some stations even give away fresh vegetables.



## South Africa



HUANG QIU-YUE

South Africa has recorded the highest number of coronavirus infections on the African continent. During July and August 2020, when the pandemic situation was especially severe, Tzu Chi volunteers visited remote countryside areas to distribute food to underserved households. People live far apart in the mountains of Ladysmith, so some aid recipients used donkeys to bring home the rice they received from Tzu Chi.

# Europe

The Tzu Chi Foundation has provided anti-coronavirus supplies to 20 countries in Europe to help them battle COVID-19:

- Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the Vatican City



## France



XU SHU-FANG

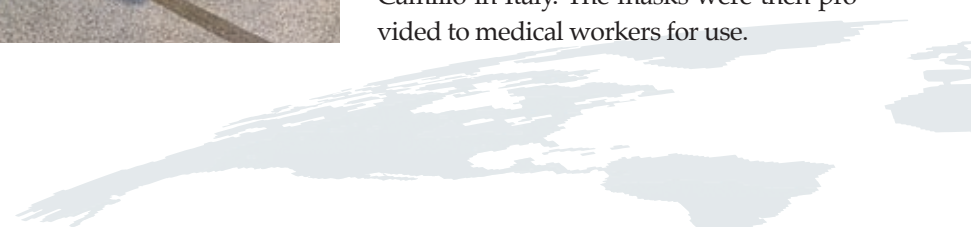
Centre Hospitalier Intercommunal Robert-Ballanger, a hospital in Paris, ran short of medical masks during the first wave of COVID-19. When some masks donated by Tzu Chi arrived at the hospital, medical workers took a short break from their busy work to thank the foundation for their donation.

## Italy



COURTESY OF TZU CHI HUALIEN HEADQUARTERS

Italy was hit especially hard by COVID-19 during the first half of 2020. Father Giuseppe Didone, a Camillian priest from Italy who has served in Taiwan for over five decades, helped Tzu Chi donate 20,000 medical masks to Fondazione Opera San Camillo in Italy. The masks were then provided to medical workers for use.





## Germany



25.04.2020  
**200.000 Mund-Nasen-Schutz Masken gespendet**  
 Die Tzu Chi Foundation schickt Masken an die Kliniken Südostbayern

Die Tzu Chi Foundation ist eine gemeinnützige humanitäre Hilfsorganisation mit Sitz in Taiwan und mit über 10 Millionen ehrenamtlichen Helfern und Spendern aus mehr als 50 Nationen weltweit. Wir freuen uns sehr über die Hilfsbereitschaft und Solidarität vom anderen Ende der Welt und senden ein herzliches Dankeschön an die Spender, die uns trotz der geografisch weiten Entfernung, so nah sind.

Eighty thousand medical masks donated by Tzu Chi arrived at Frankfurt Airport in April 2020. They were subsequently delivered to hospitals in Heinsberg, a district in Nordrhein-Westfalen that had been hit hard by the coronavirus. Various hospitals in Bavaria also received 200,000 masks and face shields from Tzu Chi. On their website, Kliniken Südostbayern AG, the “Clinics Southeast Bavaria,” introduced and thanked Tzu Chi for helping their doctors and nurses better equip themselves against the pandemic.



## The United Kingdom



Tzu Chi volunteers in the United Kingdom started making and giving away cloth masks in March 2020 to help protect community residents from COVID-19. Volunteers also donated personal protective equipment to 63 medical institutions and 48 social welfare organizations in the UK. This photo shows volunteers delivering gift packs in June to ER and ICU workers in York Hospital in the city of York.

# Cross-Religion Cooperation

## Tzu Chi's COVID-19 Aid to India

By Ye Zi-hao

Translated by Tang Yau-yang

Photos courtesy of the Tzu Chi Foundation

*Tzu Chi has worked with several organizations in India to help needy people in that nation through the economic challenges caused by the pandemic.*

By early December 2020, more than 9.7 million people in India had been infected by the COVID-19 virus, the second highest number in the world. The Indian people have paid an immeasurable cost for lockdowns and closings in their fight against the virus. More than 100 million people lost their jobs and were in dire need of assistance.

The Tzu Chi Foundation wanted to help directly, but it had no branch office in India, making it difficult to render aid. Instead, the foundation has collaborated with other organizations, including the Camillians (a Roman Catholic religious order), the Missionaries of Charity, and two Tibetan Buddhist temples to distribute aid to people in India to help them through the pandemic. By the end of October 2020, the aid provided by Tzu Chi had reached 100,000 families.

The cooperation between Tzu Chi and the Camillians came about as follows. On April 1, 2020, Father Giuseppe Didone, a Camillian priest who has lived and served in Taiwan since 1965, issued an appeal to the Taiwanese people for monetary donations to buy desperately needed medical supplies to help his native Italy combat the coronavirus. In just six days, more than 20,000 Taiwanese had responded with donations totaling 120 million New Taiwan dollars (US\$3.9 million) to support the priest's drive. Although the donation campaign was planned to run for two weeks, the generous outpouring of support from the Taiwanese people enabled him to halt the drive after a single week.

Tzu Chi became involved in this effort when Father Didone needed help to purchase the medical supplies to send to his home country. Yan Po-wen (顏博文), CEO of the Tzu Chi charity mis-

sion, personally visited Camillian Saint Mary's Hospital in Yilan, northern Taiwan, to discuss with the priest and his team how Tzu Chi could help. The foundation subsequently mobilized its volunteers in China and elsewhere to help him procure medical supplies in a global market severely strained by the raging pandemic.

Later, Father Didone learned that Tzu Chi wanted to help India fight the pandemic but was experiencing difficulties because they lacked a chapter there to carry out the work. This provided him an opportunity to help Tzu Chi as they had helped him. Father Didone and his team contacted the Camillians in India and asked them to help Tzu Chi out.

The Camillians in India helped send Tzu Chi's food aid to 13 states in the country, including Assam, in northeastern India, and Gujarat, on the western coast of India, where Mahatma Gandhi and Prime Minister Narendra Modi were born. Tzu Chi's aid has also reached New Delhi, India's capital, with the help of the Camillians.

The Missionaries of Charity, founded by Mother Teresa, also helped distribute relief goods in Calcutta on behalf of Tzu Chi. With their assistance, food and other necessities donated by Tzu Chi reached 19,600 households in Calcutta.

### Tide them over an impasse

Another organization that has enabled Tzu Chi's COVID aid to reach India is ABM Samaj Prabodhan Sanstha. Pravin Bhalesain, a member of this non-profit organization, was introduced to Tzu Chi in 2014 during an international Buddhism conference in India. He and his mother visited Dharma Master Cheng Yen in Taiwan in March of the fol-



The Camillians held aid distributions in India with the help of the police and other organizations

lowing year. When Nepal was hit by an earthquake a month later, Bhalesain joined a Tzu Chi relief team that traveled to that country to help survivors. He has since become Tzu Chi’s contact person in India.

When the pandemic broke out in 2020, Bhalesain arranged for ABM members to distribute food provided by Tzu Chi to 2,000 needy families in Mumbai and Pune, the two biggest cities in the state of Maharashtra, in western India.

Chen Shang-wei (陳尚薇), a Tzu Chi staffer in Taiwan who helps handle the foundation’s aid to India, said of ABM’s work: “They started compil-

ing distribution rosters near the end of May. It was a difficult task because the slums [receiving Tzu Chi’s aid] were widely dispersed. And though there were volunteers in every district willing to compile the rosters, there were no computers to help them with the work. Everything had to be done by hand.” She displayed photos of some handwritten rosters.

In late May, Cyclone Amphan hit India, exacerbating the already grim situation during the pandemic and making the need for relief goods even more urgent. Adding insult to injury, lockdown measures enforced by the Indian government

## Numbers of Families Receiving Tzu Chi’s Aid Through the Foundation’s Partners in India:

- 📍 ABM Samaj Prabodhan Sanstha  
**2,000** Families in Mumbai and Pune

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- 📍 The Camillians  
**62,811** Families in 13 States

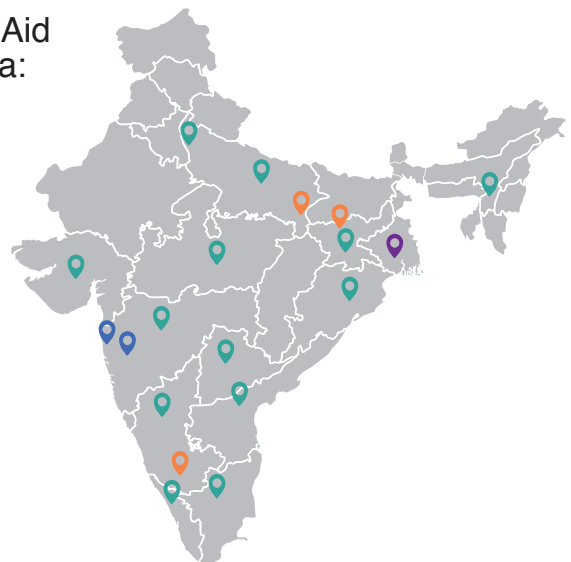
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- 📍 The Missionaries of Charity  
**19,600** Families in Calcutta

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- 📍 Two Tibetan Buddhist temples  
**1,830** Families in Three Locations

Information provided by the Tzu Chi Foundation  
 Last updated: November 1, 2020





**Tzu Chi-supplied relief goods were distributed at a Buddhist temple to underserved families in Bodhgaya and Varanasi, in northern India.**

Pravin Bhalesain said to her during their first video conference after the distributions were launched: “Sister, I’m still alive.”

If the conditions allowed, the volunteers would set up at distribution venues the portraits of the Buddha and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), an Indian politician and social reformer. Dr. Ambedkar had inspired the Dalit Buddhist movement and campaigned against social discrimination towards the Dalits, sometimes referred to as “the untouchables.” Most of the recipients of Tzu Chi’s aid were from the bottom echelons of Indian society; to them, the Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar were symbols of hope—the former advocating equality and compassion for all, and the latter pushing for the abolition of the caste system in the nation.

ABM volunteers also relayed Tzu Chi’s best wishes at the distribution events. They hung up a banner that read: “Tzu Chi Cares for You,” and read aloud a letter from Master Cheng Yen in English and Marathi, a local language.

Sitaram Gaikwad, founder and head of ABM, said that it was his honor to translate the letter from Master Cheng Yen into their local language. He had read each word and phrase in the letter more than a hundred times. He felt that everything in the letter reflected what every person in the world should awaken to in order to ensure the survival of mankind.

He pointed out that he had been born an untouchable. One day 64 years ago, he and his mother were begging in a village when someone said to his mother, “You’re not an untouchable any more. You are a Buddhist now, so stop begging.”

After he became a Buddhist, Gaikwad did his best to become self-reliant. He stopped considering himself an untouchable, and worked hard to shatter the shackles of the caste system and become a respected member of society. He founded ABM in 1984. ABM members follow and spread the beliefs of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Pulling together love and kindness from society, ABM has dedicated themselves to helping and empowering the disadvantaged people of society for 34 years now.

Gaikwad commended Tzu Chi for allowing them to help thousands of underprivileged families during the difficult time of the pandemic. In a challenging time like this, only love and mutual help can pull people through. ❀

made ABM members’ work of compiling rosters even more difficult. In the beginning, ABM members could still apply for and obtain permits to visit the needy. But in July, Mumbai and Pune made the lockdowns in those cities even more restrictive, stopping the volunteers in their tracks. The compilation of distribution rosters came to a screeching halt.

The government relaxed the lockdown restrictions in August, not because the spread of the virus had slowed, but because it was becoming impossible for people to maintain their bare existence. ABM jumped on the opportunity to distribute Tzu Chi-supplied goods. Since large distribution events would have attracted crowds of one to two thousand aid recipients, ABM opted to hold smaller distributions to minimize the risks of infection. The volunteers followed delivery trucks to one village after another, distributing to dozens of families at each stop. They protected themselves with masks and gloves. In contrast, most recipients were too poor to afford masks, so many of them used a corner of their saris to cover their mouths. Though that was probably the best they could do, one couldn’t help but be concerned about their safety.

In the height and heat of the pandemic, there was no guarantee that volunteers would come back safe and sound from a distribution; they could only do their utmost to protect themselves and hope for the best. “Every time I contacted our volunteers,” Chen Shang-wei said, “I asked them to please be very, very careful. I asked them, ‘Did you take proper precautionary measures?’ every time they went out for a distribution or when they sent back messages.” Chen clearly recalled the first thing

# Serving the Most Vulnerable

**Narrated by Huang Jing En**

Compiled by *Tzu Chi Monthly* editorial staff

Edited and translated by Wu Hsiao-ting

*The streets are full of destitute people in need of help. Despite the overwhelming need, these Catholic nuns do their best, meeting the suffering where they are, giving them aid to help them survive the pandemic.*

“Father, have you taken time to rest?” I asked the priest. He replied, “What is rest? Rest is a luxury to us.”

“It’s hot. Be sure to drink plenty of water,” I added. He responded, “We will, but the longer we rest, the longer the line of people needing help will grow. We must get the aid out as quickly as possible.”

I’m a staffer at the Tzu Chi Foundation CEO Office in Hualien, Taiwan. In May and June 2020, I participated in video conferences with Father Baby Ellickal, M.I., head of the Camillians in India. During those conversations, I learned that despite sweltering temperatures reaching nearly 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit), the Camillians, an Italian Catholic missionary order, were still going out in their clerical habits to distribute aid to

the needy. The Camillians in India were carrying out a relief project with Tzu Chi to help underprivileged people there survive the pandemic. The project was launched in April, but by the end of May, the impoverished in India had increased six-fold. This rapid increase was the result of the pandemic and the measures enacted to prevent its spread.

Father Ellickal said that the longer the lockdowns in India lasted, the harder it would be for people there to make a living. At the same time, however, he realized that the number of infections

**Tzu Chi sent flour, rice, millet, and over 10,000 medical masks to nuns at the Missionaries of Charity, who subsequently distributed the aid to the needy in India.**



would spike without lockdowns, and that it would be the underprivileged who would bear the brunt of those infections. The poor were in a no-win situation. He stressed that even though they couldn't help everyone in need, they would do their best. They had enlisted the help of Catholic and other Christian sectors in India to serve the poor together.

The Camillians, working with Tzu Chi, distributed three months' worth of food to 80,000 people from April to August. I was full of gratitude every time we had a video conference with the Camillians. I was impressed by their spirit of service and their dedication to help the needy. The same spirit of selfless service was also evident among the sisters of the Missionaries of Charity, another Catholic order working in partnership with Tzu Chi to deliver COVID aid to the underserved in India. The sisters told us that no matter what aid goods they received, the poor would always be the first to benefit. Only if there were leftovers would they consider their own needs.

The sisters said they were confronted by an endless supply of poor people on the street the moment they stepped out of their church. Many were homeless and didn't have a penny to their name; they had nothing but the tattered clothes on their backs. If they were old or sick—or both—their plight was even worse. Elderly folks whose families were unable to care for them were left on the streets to fend for themselves. In this world of endless need, even children saw no future for themselves.

The sisters opened their doors every day to long lines of people who had come in hope of receiving

some food, no matter the amount. "We can't pretend that we don't see or hear them," said a sister. "Even though the streets are chock-full of poor people like them, too numerous to be aided, we must do what we can to help."

Given the circumstances, the nuns felt that the aid from Tzu Chi was the best gift they could receive—it was as if they had received a tremendous blessing from God. They met to discuss how to get the food supplies to the needy and decided to go out into the streets every day to make distributions.

Since India was in the middle of a rampant pandemic, we asked them why they insisted on going out into the streets to make the distributions. They answered, "Because that's where the poorest people are. We can't afford not to go there."

Calcutta is huge, and some remote areas are only accessible by boat. When the sisters were visiting these remote areas to bring aid to the needy there, some people gave away their seats on a boat so that the sisters could cross the river along with their supplies. When the supplies were offloaded, local villagers helped the nuns haul them manually by cart to the distribution site.

The sisters conducted their distributions carefully, wearing protective gear. Despite their precautions, 12 of them were suspected to have contracted the coronavirus, and two passed away. Their fellow nuns said that the two sisters had passed on with-

**Hungry people in the countryside in India line up to receive food distributed by nuns from the Missionaries of Charity.**





out regrets, and that in Heaven they would continue to pray for everyone.

The nuns told us they believed that the Tzu Chi volunteers were angels sent by God. They said that Master Cheng Yen, the founder of the Tzu Chi Foundation, and Mother Teresa, the founder of the Missionaries of Charity, were both significant religious figures in modern times, bringing light to a dark world of suffering people. What the sisters said brought to mind something Father Ellickal, of the Camillians, once said. He told us that the love of Master Cheng Yen and Tzu Chi was like a lamp shining across the dark world of underprivileged people in India. He said that every time they distributed Tzu Chi's aid to the poor, they saw suffering in its numerous forms: elderly people with no one to care for them; women whose husbands had died and left them struggling to support their families; untouchables who struggled on the verge of survival. Father Ellickal hoped that the cross-religion cooperation between Tzu Chi and the Camillians could continue and that the two organizations could together bring the love of God and the Buddha to more needy people, fulfilling the ideal of "all for one, one for all."

When the pandemic led to lockdowns around the world, Master Cheng Yen said that even though Tzu Chi volunteers couldn't personally reach some countries in the world during this difficult time, the foundation should still try to get its aid to people in those countries by working with humanitarian or medical organizations the foundation had worked with before. That was why Tzu Chi personnel had sought out Médecins du Monde (Doctors of the World) and with their help sent COVID aid to 26 countries, including South Sudan, Benin, Iraq, and Madagascar. Volunteers in Thailand and Malaysia had long worked with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to help displaced people in those countries. The UN refugee agency helped Tzu Chi carry out its COVID aid project too.

It has not been easy for our foundation to pull off the aid project. Challenges have abounded at every step of the process. Despite the difficulties, we have kept in mind the plight of the needy and pulled out all the stops to enable our aid to reach them.

Tzu Chi's preliminary plan was to provide the destitute in India with six months' worth of food supplies, but Master Cheng Yen has instructed that as long as the pandemic persists, Tzu Chi will continue its aid to those affected. We sincerely hope that the love from all the kind-hearted donors in the world will help the poorest people in the world ride out this crisis. ❀



**When sisters of the Missionaries of Charity distributed aid on the streets and in villages and saw sick people living out in the open air, they brought them back to their convent and cared for them—after first making sure they were not COVID-19 patients.**

# Numbers Can Talk

## Dialysis Patients Benefit From a Vegetarian Diet

**Text and photos by Yew Chin Bey**

Translated by Wu Hsiao-ting

*The Tzu Chi Dialysis Center in Kedah, Malaysia, started providing vegetarian meals to their patients in April 2020 in an effort to promote vegetarianism during the pandemic. Five weeks after the meal program was launched, something unexpected happened.*

**H**ann Ping A/L Ba (陳漢彬), of Kedah, Malaysia, suffers from hereditary diabetes. The disease has led to his kidney failure, the amputation of his left foot, and even his blindness. The multiple blows depressed him so much he's even thought of suicide. However, his spirits were lifted when he learned that he had been accepted as a patient at the Tzu Chi Dialysis Center in Kedah. The center provides free dialysis treatment to needy patients.

Despite his relief at being accepted, Hann Ping couldn't help but feel some secret misgivings at the same time. Since the Tzu Chi Foundation is a Buddhist organization, he worried he'd have to become a vegetarian when he started his treatment at the dialysis center.

It was thus with some trepidation that he made his first visit to the center, where he learned to his relief that a vegetarian diet was not compulsory for patients there—even though only meatless food was allowed into the center. With his misgivings dispelled, he started receiving treatment. While his body was being taken care of at the center, the kindness and care shown by the nursing staff, other patients, and the Tzu Chi volunteers who served there brightened his dark inner world. He began to think more positively, telling himself that he had to take good care of himself so that the love and help he had received from others wouldn't be wasted. He was happy that he had gotten to know many people at the center.

During his dialysis sessions, Hann Ping often watched programs on Da Ai TV—a station run by the Tzu Chi Foundation. That was how he came to hear Dharma Master Cheng Yen encouraging

everyone to eat vegetarian. The nurses at the center also often shared with him the benefits of a vegetarian diet. His heart began to warm toward such a diet, but he always put a stop to those thoughts. He had had to depend on his family to tend to his needs since he fell ill, and he didn't want to add to their burden by asking them to cook vegetarian meals for him.

Things took a turn after the pandemic broke out, when Tzu Chi Kedah decided to start providing patients at the dialysis center with vegetarian meals. A nurse at the center made a covenant with Hann Ping that they would adopt a vegetarian diet together. Hann Ping thus decided to begin eating vegetarian. On the days when he has dialysis, he brings a meal box to the center to take home the food provided by Tzu Chi. On the days when he doesn't, his sister, who lives with him, cooks for him.

Hann Ping has no preference for either vegetarian or non-vegetarian food. For him, food is just something that gives him energy to keep going. The reason he switched to vegetarianism was his respect for life. "Master Cheng Yen says that according to statistics, more than 2,000 animals are slaughtered every second to feed humans," Hann Ping said. "Per second, not per minute! I was shocked to learn how many chickens, cows, and sheep are sacrificed for human consumption."

Hann Ping declared that the most marked change he noticed in himself after he adopted a vegetarian diet was comfortable and regular bowel movements. Many dialysis patients suffer from constipation due to fluid and dietary restrictions.



**A nurse at the Tzu Chi Dialysis Center in Kedah, Malaysia, distributes vegetarian meals to patients who have signed up for a vegetarian meal program.**

Hann Ping had experienced this too, but eating vegetarian improved that problem for him. He began to hope that he would reap other health benefits from a vegetarian diet, especially as the numbers from his blood tests had never been that good.

### **Challenges for the cooking team**

In response to Master Cheng Yen's repeated appeals for people to eat vegetarian, and with the support of some volunteers who are entrepreneurs, the Tzu Chi Dialysis Center in Kedah started providing vegetarian meals to patients and their families on April 5, 2020. Volunteers hoped that this would inspire more people to give vegetarianism a try.

Volunteers and nurses at the dialysis center had often shared the benefits of vegetarianism with patients, but their response was lukewarm at best. When Ooi Lee Choo (黃麗珠), head of nurses at the center, asked patients about their willingness to try vegetarianism, she received responses like, "I don't know what vegetarianism is. Vegetarianism is a foreign concept to us Malays," or "I've never tried vegetarian food." Such lackluster attitudes among patients made her doubt whether the vegetarian meal program would stand a chance of succeeding.

The Malaysian government initiated a nationwide Movement Control Order (MCO) on March 18, 2020, to slow the spread of COVID-19. The order made it difficult for volunteers to gather together to cook, and so Lamduan Sae Tan (陳南鸞), a dialysis patient who received her Tzu Chi volunteer certification in 2018, took on the responsibility of cooking for the program when it was started in April.

To make the food in time, she got up every morning at five and set to work. She felt happy that she could use her cooking skills to inspire more people to eat vegetarian. Besides, her family's income had been hurt by the movement restrictions put in place by the government, and so the extra money she earned from cooking for the program helped relieve the financial strain on her family.

Originally from Thailand, Tan moved to Malaysia many years ago after marrying a man in the country. She had been in Malaysia long enough to know full well the food preferences and tastes of



**The delicious food prepared by Tzu Chi volunteers in Kedah shattered the preconceptions that many kidney patients had about vegetarianism.**

local people. And, as a dialysis patient herself, she had the additional advantage of knowing what food was better for such patients. The tasteful food she prepared for the program shattered people's preconceptions of vegetarianism. The program gathered steam as more and more patients signed on and brought home the food she prepared.

Mohd Ikram, a dialysis patient who had joined the program, said that he knew that many illnesses were diet related. The coronavirus pandemic, for example, was suspected to have originated in animals and spread to humans in meat markets. He promised that he'd stay on a vegetarian diet as much as possible, especially as such a diet has the additional benefit of contributing to a more sustainable Earth.

The MCO that the government had announced to curb the virus was eased in May, so some culinary volunteers took over from Tan in mid-May and began cooking for the vegetarian program. Volunteers work every day but Friday at the Tzu Chi Jing Si Hall kitchen in Kedah to prepare vegetarian meals for dialysis patients at the center, their families, and Tzu Chi staffers. Program coordinator Lim Get Kee (林育芝) said that the biggest challenge facing the cooking team was how to create delicious but healthy food for

participating patients. The team's most important guideline is that their food must be low in oil, salt, sugar, and processed ingredients. That's because the consumption of high amounts of sodium, potassium, and phosphorus can lead to arrhythmia, bone disorders, itchiness, or edema in kidney patients. On account of that, volunteers make a point of quick-boiling vegetables that are high in potassium before cooking them. Boiling food first removes some of the undesirable potassium.

"We searched online for vegetarian recipes," said Seow Bee Teu (蕭美綢), a member of the cooking team, "and only then did we realize that some food was best avoided if you had kidney disease. We've learned a lot in the process." After some work, they finally came up with recipes suitable for kidney patients.

Volunteers on the cooking team are divided into groups, with each group cooking two days a week. When a group finishes cooking for a meal, they photograph the three dishes they have prepared and send the images to the cooking team's



group chat. This is not to show off what they have cooked, but a way to allow other groups to know what dishes have been prepared so that the same dishes won't appear on the menu again too soon. Given the limited ingredients they can use, the team really must tap into their creativity to add variety to the menu. For example, by using different cooking methods or seasoning, they are able to come up with different dishes. The dishes the team cooks are so good and savory that just looking at their images on a cell phone can make one's mouth water.

The volunteers' creativity and commitment have managed to create a rich assortment of dishes, despite the dietary restrictions for the 42 dialysis patients that have signed up for the vegetarian meal program. Their work has really impressed Hann Ping, mentioned near the top of this article. "The volunteers can create a variety of dishes using tofu alone," said Hann Ping. "They make me feel that tofu can be as delicious as meat." The food they prepare is so good Hann Ping doesn't mind not eating meat at all!

● Five weeks after the program was started, something happened that took Head Nurse Ooi

**A patient gives a thumbs up for the vegetarian meals he has received at the Tzu Chi Dialysis Center in Kedah. He looks forward to the days during which he undergoes dialysis at the center. On those days he can enjoy the delicious vegetarian food prepared by Tzu Chi volunteers.**

completely by surprise. Ooi recounted the experience: "We run routine blood tests on our patients every three months. But when the reports came back over a month after the vegetarian program was launched, we noticed that the blood phosphate levels in many patients was significantly lower than before. When we looked more closely, we discovered that these patients had all taken part in our meal program!" In people with chronic kidney disease, high phosphate levels in the blood may cause pain in the bones or even lead to bone fractures. Clearly, the lowered phosphate levels were very good news for the patients.

Eight weeks into the program, the blood test results from another group of patients showed improvement too. All this definitely gave the staffers at the dialysis center more confidence to continue promoting vegetarianism! ●●



**Chen Jing-wei drives his wheelchair to his next class. Finishing his college education is one of his dreams. Every day that brings him closer to the fulfillment of his dreams is a beautiful day for him.**



# A Spirit Unbounded

**By Leong Imm Chon**

Translated by Wu Hsiao-ting

Photos by Hsiao Yiu-hwa

*Chen Jing-wei suffers from a rare medical condition—spinal muscular atrophy. The disease has deformed his body and confined him to a wheelchair, but it can't break his spirit. He lives each day as if it were his last, and he works hard to fulfill his dreams. Every day is a beautiful day for him.*

**I**wonder how much longer I will live. A question like this rarely occurs to young people, for most of whom death is still far away. However, Chen Jing-wei (陳景維), 21, often asks himself this question.

Jing-wei was diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy not long after he was born. His four limbs and trunk suffer from severe weakness, and his spine is badly misshapen. His distorted spine compresses his organs, which affects the ability of his heart and lungs to function normally. He is getting weaker day by day. But despite all that, he faces his debilitating disease with optimism. He lives each day as if it were his last, racing against time to make his dreams a reality.

### **Controlling his weight**

Jing-wei lives with his grandparents. His parents entrusted him to their care after they divorced. He can't take care of himself and so he must depend on his grandmother, Li Mei-hua (李美華), for his daily needs. She helps him eat, wash himself, and get in and out of his wheelchair. Her room has a door that leads to his room, and she even goes to him at irregular intervals at night to help him turn over in bed.

Jing-wei was in the hospital frequently when he was a child due to a weak immune system. Mei-hua had to take care of him at the hospital and run the household at the same time. She was often run ragged going back and forth between the two places during his hospitalizations. Feeling for his grandma, Jing-wei did his best to be a good patient. He endured all the necessary treatments and took all his medications without complaint so that he could recover as soon as possible.

His frequent visits to the hospital, coupled with the expenses for his assistive devices, placed a huge financial strain on his family. To enable him to move on his own, his grandma bought an electric wheelchair for him. Even with a subsidy, it still cost \$25,000 Taiwanese dollars (US\$835). His grandma couldn't afford to pay for it all at once, so she had to pay it off in installments over time. To make the payments, Mei-hua got up every morning at 2:30 and went to a junior college 20 kilometers (12 miles) away to sell breakfasts to students there. She returned home in the afternoon, but barely had time to rest before Jing-wei returned home from school. Once he got home, she needed to fix his dinner and take care of his other needs.

"Grandma slept less than five hours a day," Jing-wei recalled, "but I never heard her complain of being tired." Growing up under her care, Jing-wei has felt his grandma's love every step of the way.

One thing in particular stands out in his memory: the indescribably happy sparkle in her eyes when he first learned to use a powered wheelchair. "Grandma looked at me with her eyes shining, as if I had suddenly received a pair of legs that enabled me to walk on my own." He will never forget how her face lit up with joy that day.

Jing-wei watches his diet and tries to keep his weight under 30 kilograms (66 pounds). This is so he won't become too heavy and make it more difficult for his grandma to move him. He is deeply grateful to her for devoting almost all her time to tending to his needs and for giving him such excellent care, so he wants to make her job as easy as possible. "Grandma is the one who has given me the most love in my life," said Jing-wei. "Without her, I wouldn't be here today."

"I always say that she's a 'Super Grandma,'" he added. Her perseverance and resilience are what he admires most about her. Her upbeat and optimistic attitude towards life has also greatly impacted him. Infected by her positivity, he has learned to face his limitations with courage. He has come to realize that the most important thing in life is to seize each moment and enjoy life.

Jing-wei noticed after he grew up that years of caring for him had taken a toll on his grandma—she often looked worn around the edges. To ease her burden and prevent her from worrying, he's worked hard to become more independent. He successfully tested into a university, and he does his best to pay his own way through school. Because his mobility is severely limited, the transportation fees to and from school alone come to 26,000 Taiwanese dollars (US\$865) a month. He also needs to employ the service of a personal caregiver, which runs another 23,000 Taiwanese dollars a month. To pay for those costs and his tuition fees, he gives talks whenever he can and applies to institutions and businesses for scholarships. He is determined to lighten his grandma's burden however he can.

Jing-wei's consideration for his grandmother moves her to tears. He observes, "Grandma has never shed a tear over her own life. She hasn't had an easy life herself—but she cries thinking of my care for her."

### **Encountering Tzu Chi**

Jing-wei is now a junior in the Department of Digital Marketing at the Lan Yang Institute of Technology in Yilan County, northern Taiwan. In October 2019, a teacher at his school posted a message to Tzu Chi's website explaining Jing-wei's situation to the foundation—how he was afflicted with a





rare disease and how his family was having difficulty affording his school-related expenses. That was how Tzu Chi entered Jing-wei's life.

Soon thereafter, a group of Tzu Chi volunteers and social workers visited Jing-wei at his home to assess his needs. They discovered during their visit that Jing-wei's hands and feet were very cold. They asked him about it, and learned that coldness in the extremities is due to poor circulation brought on by muscular atrophy. Volunteer Huang Li-rong (黃麗蓉) held Jing-wei's hands in hers throughout the visit, hoping to keep them warm with the heat from her hands.

Jing-wei does most of his school assignments on a computer and needs to print them out after finishing them. To make it easier to complete his homework, Tzu Chi volunteers decided to buy a color printer for him. Social worker Lin Jia-lin (林家琳) helped install the printer for him and taught him how to use it. The volunteers also discovered during their visit that the seat of his wheelchair, more than ten years old, was badly worn. They arranged to have it replaced and made sure that the new seat was comfortable to sit on. While replacing the seat, the mechanic noticed that the wheelchair's left rear tire needed replacing too. Volunteers immediately asked him to take care of that too.

**Like his fellow schoolmates, Jing-wei is required to complete ten hours of volunteer work during each semester of his third year in college. He chose to fulfill that requirement by helping other students with their homework.**

Jing-wei couldn't turn his head to check his blind spot when backing up his wheelchair, and he would often bump into people or walls behind him. In response, Tzu Chi paid to have a backup sensor installed for him so he could travel more safely in his wheelchair. Volunteers also visited his school to check the disability facilities there. When they found that his caregiver needed a bed to help him take off and put on his pants in a bathroom, they brought him a Tzu Chi folding bed to serve this need.

Social worker Lin Jia-lin said that Jing-wei turned down Tzu Chi's offer to help with his school fees and transportation costs because he had found sponsors from the business community to cover those expenses. Lin expressed her admiration for Jing-wei's independent spirit. Though he declined Tzu Chi's financial aid, the foundation didn't close his case. Volunteers have continued visiting him and his grandma and providing support whenever they need it. Volunteer Huang Li-zhen (黃麗珍), a hair-



Even though afflicted with spinal muscular atrophy, Jing-wei has never thought of giving up his schooling. His condition prevents him from using his hands to do his homework, so he uses speech recognition technologies for that purpose. He does very well in school, as evidenced by the certificates of academic excellence peppering the wall pictured here. He has even successfully obtained several professional licenses.



dresser, even became Jing-wei's "personal hairdresser" after obtaining his permission. She has photographed his head from various angles to design a hairstyle he likes.

### The permanence of impermanence

"My body is constantly changing with time," Jing-wei said to Tzu Chi volunteers when they visited him in mid-September 2020. "I noticed last week that the index finger on my right hand—the only finger I could move—has begun to get crooked and rigid, making it hard for me to use the mouse." The constant deterioration of his body is the most difficult challenge facing him in life.

He vaguely remembers his time in kindergarten, when he could still raise his hands and sit without back support, but he had lost those abilities by the time he entered elementary school. The challenges brought on by his illness are numerous; in addition to coping with the physical pain in his body, he also faces enormous psychological pressure, induced by fear, worry, and anxiety.

The challenges he faces every day are beyond the imagination of ordinary, healthy people. Take breathing, for example, something most people take for granted. Due to the degeneration of his spinal motor neurons and progressive muscle wasting, he is not only deprived of his mobility—he can't control his own breathing either. He requires a ventilator when he sleeps at night just to stabilize his breathing.

But Jing-wei refuses to let the obstacles he faces bring him down. He does his best to keep a positive attitude. "There lives a 'little devil' in my body," he says. "He always sneaks up and attacks me when I'm not paying attention." Over the years, he has learned how to better live in peace with "the little devil." For example, he knows that *his little devil* is most active in winter, resulting in frequent visits to the hospital. In order not to let *him* get his way, Jing-wei is vigilant about eating food rich in vitamin C. He also wears a mask when he is out to protect himself from the flu or other illnesses.

Even though his physical limitations require him to work harder to achieve anything compared with other people, he never uses his disability as an excuse to take the easy way out. When his hand muscles atrophied to such a degree that he could no longer use his hands to do his homework, he turned to speech recognition technologies for help. With the help of technology and by dint of his hard work, he not only does very well in his schoolwork, but he also has been able to obtain several professional licenses, including ones for computer software application and web page editing and design. Recently,



**Tzu Chi volunteers check Jing-wei's hands on a visit to his home. They can detect changes to his body caused by his illness during each visit.**

he's been preparing for a licensing exam in social media marketing.

Jing-wei says that an understanding of life's impermanence has helped him come to terms with his illness. He says that anyone could be hit by illness; it's just that his illness has lasted longer. He even says with incredibly good cheer: "My condition is like winning a one-in-10,000 lottery. Who could be luckier than me? I must have come into this world with a great mission to accomplish."

One of his dreams is to finish his college education. "I've now finished my first two years in college," he said, "and I've been at the top of my class." Even though he must work hard to cover his monthly expenses of at least 48,000 Taiwanese dollars (US\$1,600)—through giving talks, raising money, winning scholarships, etc.—he never complains. His motto is "Follow your own path and make your life worthwhile." He does his best because he doesn't want to leave this world with any regrets.

### Warm interactions

Jing-wei's therapist told him during a physiotherapy session that his work ethic was so inspiring he should share his story on social media. Taking his therapist's advice, Jing-wei set up a Facebook fan page on October 26, 2016. He uses Facebook to record his daily life, hoping that his story will encourage everyone not to give up easily on themselves.

Though he set up and runs the fan page to help others, Jing-wei has benefited a lot from it too. The messages left by his fans have greatly cheered him. "Your smile is your best asset," one said. "I have no doubt you will be successful in whatever you do." Another wrote: "Don't ever lose hope. You'll stand up one day." Jing-wei knows well that no cure has yet been discovered for his disease, but messages like these make him hopeful of a miracle.

Another message read, "I felt my heart soar reading your articles. You're really something!" Yet another read, "Some things have happened to me recently that made me want to call it quits. But then I thought of you and remembered our covenant to be brave together. Let's renew that covenant!" Jing-wei said that he knows that his ability to help others is limited, but he is thrilled that his story has the power to move and inspire others and bring some warmth to society. Answering his Facebook messages has become one of the things he enjoys doing most every day.

In 2020, Jing-wei won the Presidential Education Award, which recognizes and honors students who manage to thrive and shine despite difficult circumstances. Award jurors encouraged Jing-wei to dream bigger, and that inspired him to set longer-term goals for himself. "I hope the deterioration of my body will slow down so that I can finish college, publish a book of my own, give a TED talk, and establish a marketing studio at home," he said.

And Jing-wei does more than just dream. When he is not busy with his schoolwork, he accepts invitations to give talks, works on his book, and prepares and sits for licensing exams that will improve his future career prospects. Tzu Chi volunteers and social workers have also worked to help him realize his dreams. They invited him to share his story during a Tzu Chi scholarship award ceremony in October 2020, and the volunteers plan to invite him for more presentations to help prepare him for a bigger stage in the future.

"We're all deeply moved by Jing-wei's resilience and how earnestly he lives his life," said volunteer Huang Li-rong. She remarked that according to doctors, most people suffering from Jing-wei's medical condition do not live past high school age, but Jing-wei hasn't allowed a short life expectancy to dampen his determination to live a full life. Huang felt that she has a lot to learn from the tremendous resilience shown by the young man and the efforts he puts in to bring value into his life.

"Jing-wei is like our teacher," volunteer Huang Li-zhen observed. "He shows us how to be positive and never give up. He says that every day he lives is another day gained." Huang added that Jing-wei always has a smile on his face whenever she sees him. It's impossible not to be infected by his positive energy.

Jing-wei remembers that it was at the end of 2019 that Tzu Chi came into his life. A group of volunteers and social workers visited him at his home. "Even though it was the first time we met," he said, "I immediately felt close to them. The volunteers and



social workers are like my family, infusing a lot of positive energy into me."

He learned later that the volunteers have jobs of their own and use their time off work to serve others. "They are trying to make a difference in others' lives via their volunteer work—just like what I hope to do



via my talks," he said. Seeing how the volunteers are doing what they can to help others makes him feel that he is doing the right thing in trying to reach out and touch other lives. "I feel so lucky and blessed to have encountered the volunteers and social workers," he said. "I'm deeply grateful." ❊

**Jing-wei and his grandma (second from right) pose with visiting Tzu Chi volunteers for a picture in front of their home. His grandma is holding the Presidential Education Award that Jing-wei received in 2020.**

# The Guardian Grandma

By Chen Li-an

Translated by Tang Yau-yang

Photos by Hsiao Yiu-hwa

*Jing-wei has learned to face the challenges in his life with a smile. This optimism comes from his grandma, but it is just one of her gifts to him. She cares for him, protects him, and brings light into his life. The two of them are perfect partners, learning and growing together on the path of life.*

We arrived on a fine day at an old house beside an orchard in Dongshan Township, Yilan County, Taiwan. A black dog tethered near the door barked at us relentlessly, defending its home against strangers, until a kind-looking, smiling woman walked out of the house. Li Mei-hua was the paternal grandmother of 21-year-old Chen Jing-wei, who won the Presidential Education Award in 2020.

As soon as we entered the house, Li enthusiastically directed our attention to a photo displayed on the TV stand. She explained that it had been taken not long before, when her entire family took a trip together. Jing-wei, sitting in a wheelchair in the picture, smiled broadly. He doesn't take trips often, so this photo captured a particularly special time for the family.

## The medical journey

Li shared with us that Jing-wei had lived mostly with his babysitter as an infant rather than his parents, who had been too busy working to care for him. Nobody had noticed anything unusual with the baby, until one day a relative who lived close to the babysitter asked Li an alarming question: "Why is your grandson so limp? Infants at seven or eight months of age can usually sit and crawl around, but not yours."

Upset at hearing that, an uneasy Li took time off from work and went to the sitter's home to take a look for herself. She discovered that her grandson's arms and legs did indeed look limp, and that he wasn't moving and exploring very much, not nearly as much as would be expected for a typical infant his age. Worried and con-

cerned, she and her daughter-in-law immediately took Jing-wei to the doctor.

It wasn't a simple matter to determine what was wrong with Jing-wei. When one doctor failed to explain the infant's condition, Li and her daughter-in-law would try another. The two of them tirelessly took him from one major hospital to another in northern Taiwan for a diagnosis.

Every hospital they visited put Jing-wei through a new round of tests. Blood tests were routine, but even mundane blood draws became traumatic episodes. Because Jing-wei was not yet one year old, his arms were tiny and his veins even tinier. Often a medical worker would have such a difficult time locating a good vein that Jing-wei had to endure repeated needle pokes just to have a blood sample drawn. All the while he would scream bloody murder, with great drops of blood falling from his arm. Scenes like these unsettled Li so much that she couldn't even be in the same room when he was having his blood drawn.

"Most doctors couldn't find anything wrong with Jing-wei, or they said that he was too little to be examined and diagnosed," said Li. In desperation, she and her daughter-in-law, following a suggestion, took a southbound train to the Mennonite Christian Hospital in Hualien, eastern

**Jing-wei comes home from school at around four in the afternoon. When his shuttle bus for people with disabilities pulls in, his grandma puts down the wheelchair ramp so that Jing-wei's caregiver can push him into the house.**



Taiwan. It was there that eight-month-old Jing-wei finally received a definitive diagnosis: spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), a rare disease. Li finally knew what was wrong with her grandson. Well, sort of.

"The doctor said that Jing-wei's problem was the result of defective chromosomes," Li recalled, "that his 'soft skeleton' disease was congenital. I didn't understand a word of it." The only question she asked the doctor was "How long will my grandson live?" The doctor told her bluntly that there was no effective therapy for the disease, and that those who had it lived, on average, only into their teens.

Li was devastated by the bleak prognosis. What could she do? With no cure to pursue, the doctor recommended that the only thing that she could do was to keep him healthy in order to lower the risk of complications. He also informed Li that Jing-wei's body would become more and more distorted as he grew older, squeezing his organs to one side of his body. It would then become especially important to take good care of his respiratory system.

Though Li could now see the situation more clearly and know how to care for her grandson, it was still all extremely hard to take. "I was very sad when the doctor told me the facts," she said.

### **Grandma and grandson**

Jing-wei's parents divorced when he was ten months old. His father left town afterwards to work, but stays in touch with his family via his cell phone. Li took Jing-wei under her wing and started rearing him with her husband. She gave him the best care she could. Though she was still sad about her grandson's condition, she knew that life had to go on.

Spinal muscular atrophy occurs in one of every 10,000 births. It is an autosomal recessive genetic disorder. With SMA, the patient's anterior horn cells (motor neurons) in the spinal cord progressively degenerate. Muscular atrophy and weakness ensue. SMA is divided into three types based on the age of onset and severity of the disease. Jing-wei is a type 2 sufferer, given the extreme severity of his condition.

Jing-wei could sit by himself when he was very young—though even that was difficult—but his body began to shift a little to one side by the time he started elementary school. Once this started, he could no longer sit up by himself. Li ordered corrective clothing for him to slow the rate of deformation, but it was very expensive: 9,000 Taiwanese

dollars (US\$300) per item, a big sum for the family, especially more than a decade ago. "We didn't know at the time that we could apply for a subsidy or for reimbursement from the National Health Insurance program," she said. "My husband and I had to borrow money to pay for it."

When Jing-wei was due to start elementary school, Li became concerned that he might be bullied, discriminated against, or beaten up by other kids at school. She even considered not letting him go to school, just to protect him. She only changed her mind when the special ed director at the school paid a home visit and promised that he would never allow Jing-wei to be bullied at school.

Jing-wei, now a sunny, upbeat college student, hasn't always been that way. For a time in elementary school, he felt gloomy and inferior. His grandmother worried that if he remained that way, he would make himself unwelcome. Who wanted to be close to someone who always wore a frown? "I told him at the time to smile at everyone, whether they were his teachers or classmates," Li said. Fortunately, Jing-wei heeded her advice and started to smile more, which gradually changed him from the inside and turned him into the optimistic, cheerful person that he is today.

Li told us that by third grade Jing-wei still couldn't write his own name well. "How could his penmanship be so poor?" she remembers thinking to herself. Only later did she find the answer to her own question: his hands had started to deform. The deformity of his fingers and wrists intensified with time. He was still able to write with a pen and eat with a spoon before high school, but after that, he had to use a computer to take the place of handwriting.

Li is grateful to the many people who extended a helping hand to Jing-wei throughout his years as a student. "He wasn't interested in school at all before seventh grade," Li said, but good teachers turned him around. One of Jing-wei's teachers once said to Li, "Grandma, you must let Jing-wei continue going to school. He has a normal intellectual capacity, and he'll work hard if he really wants to go to college." It was this type of guidance and encouragement from teachers along the way that sparked Jing-wei's love of learning. They inspired him to study hard and discover his purpose in life.

Li especially cited those teachers that made the biggest impact in his education: Teachers Li and Guo and Directors Wu and Jian in Jing-wei's



junior and senior high schools, and Teacher Chen in college. Li will not for a moment forget the warmth and patience they have shown her grandson.

### **She is the center of his world, and he of hers**

Li, 67, confessed that there have been times during all those years of caring for Jing-wei that she's been upset or unhappy. Oftentimes she'd become annoyed by petty things, such as why it took Jing-wei so long to finish a bottle of water. It was often over such petty things that the two of them argued.

Li's husband has stood by her for the last 21 years as they cared for their grandchild. They used to work together on such tasks as helping Jing-wei take a shower or lifting him out of his wheelchair into his bed, but as they got older, they learned they had to stop overexerting themselves when taking care of him. "Grandpa now often feels weakness in his legs and needs to undergo regular physical therapy," Li said of her husband. Once while holding Jing-wei in his arms, he tumbled and the two of them fell flat on the floor.

Realizing that they were no longer young, Li and her husband applied to social welfare organizations, including the Taiwan Foundation for Rare Disorders and Taiwan Spinal Muscular Atrophy Families, for help to install a patient transfer device in their home. This would prevent similar hazardous incidents from happening again.

Li said that Jing-wei is particularly vulnerable to the flu or a cold when his immunity goes down. She remembers him being hospitalized almost every year as a result. He has been such a frequent patient in the hospital that all the nurses on the floor where he stays know them. Before Li retired, she often had to rush back and forth between her home, her breakfast shop, and the hospital, juggling her time taking care of her grandson, her household, and her work. That being said, she told us cheerfully, "Jing-wei didn't catch a single cold last year!"

Li couldn't help feeling a sense of satisfaction as she looked at the wall covered by media reports on Jing-wei and the many certificates of achievement he had won, including that for the Presidential Education Award. "It's a good thing that he's been willing to apply himself in school," she said of her grandson, "and also a good thing that I let him go to school."

Li's hearty character and selfless dedication have brightened Jing-wei's life. The two of them



**Li Mei-hua carefully adjusts the angle of the water bottle so that Jing-wei can drink from it more smoothly. To her, taking care of her grandson is not hard work. Her only hope is that he will remain safe and sound and healthy.**

are like great partners, taking care of each other and influencing each other on the path of life. The support from his family has undoubtedly played a big part in helping Jing-wei develop a strong resilience against life's challenges. Seeing how Jing-wei is realizing his dreams step by step, including going to a university and giving inspirational talks, Li prays that he will remain safe and sound and healthy, and that he will transcend the challenges facing him and create a path all his own. ❀

# An App for Fixing Bad Things in Life?

By Leong Imm Chon

Translated by Wu Hsiao-ting

Photo courtesy of Leong Imm Chon

*We can use an app to fix bad photos, but is there an app to help us fix bad things in life?*

I recently attended a training class for Tzu Chi documenting volunteers. During the class, our lecturer, Jian Yin-yu (簡因玉), shared with us an incredible photo editing app. It could salvage badly taken photos and give them new life. With Jian's help, I used the app to improve a photo I took during a visit to an elderly Tzu Chi care recipient. The photo had been taken against the light, so my subjects were too dark to be seen clearly. Thanks to the app, I was able to salvage the photo.

The class and that app got me to thinking. How I wish there was a similar app that, with the press of a button, could help me break my bad habits and become a better person, or reverse dreadful events and make everything okay again. Sadly, that's not how life works. Becoming a better person isn't as easy as running an app. And sometimes life's events hit us out of the blue, when we are least expecting it, catching us completely off guard. When those sorts of things happen in real life, we are stuck with the consequences—there is no reversing them, no do-over app that will reset time for us.

These thoughts brought my father, Leong Siew Cheong (梁詔滄), to mind. He passed away without any warning, catching everyone off guard, when he was 74. On a visit to Hualien, eastern Taiwan, in 2019, he suddenly had difficulty breathing, and he departed from the world just like that. My sister, Leong Yien Ngo (梁嫣娥), and I honored his wishes by donating his organs and having his body cremated, then giving him a green burial.

My dad donated a pair of corneas, his bones, and his ligaments. His gifts were expected to benefit more than a hundred people. After his organ

donation surgery, his cheeks were rosy and the corners of his mouth turned up. He looked peaceful. No one can take anything with them when they leave this world, but my dad chose to give in his final moments. Looking at his peaceful face, I was able to feel his joy, a joy that comes from giving without expecting anything in return.

## Buddhism app

Dharma Master Cheng Yen once said, "Many people today have lost their direction in life—that's why we have so many problems in society. People need guidance in a world that's full of suffering, and the Buddha's teachings are the light that can cut across the darkness." There is no shortcut to changing this world, much less an app that can fix everything for us. But we have the Dharma, that is, the Buddha's teachings, to guide us through life. If we can install a "Buddhism app" in our lives, if we have faith in the Dharma and live it out, we will have a remedy in hand for all worries and afflictions.

My family would be mired in endless remorse and sorrow if we hadn't encountered Buddhism. I experienced life's impermanence early in life—my mother passed away when I was 18. Following her death, I started searching for a way that would enable me to repay her love for me. That search led me to Tzu Chi.

Master Cheng Yen answered my questions about life. She said that using our time on Earth to benefit this world was the best way to repay our parents' love for us. That's why I decided to join Tzu Chi and use this healthy body of mine, given to me by my parents, to serve others.

It wasn't just me that joined Tzu Chi—my entire family did. Since we joined, we've unconsciously



**Leong Siew Cheong (second from right) and his two daughters, Leong Imm Chon (梁媽親, second from left) and Leong Yien Ngo (right), take part in a charitable distribution in Malaysia. Joining Tzu Chi has changed this family's life.**

changed a lot. For example, we began avoiding using styrofoam products and one-use plastic bags. We carry reusable tableware with us. We eat vegetarian. My father was the one who changed the most. Due to the influence of Buddhism, he learned to be more grateful for everything he had, and instead of seeking to have more in life, he gave of himself as much as he could. He participated actively in all kinds of volunteer work. He did his best to solicit donations for Tzu Chi, visited the needy, and did recycling work. He visited retirement homes to extend care to the elderly there, and he cooked for Tzu Chi events.

Every time he heard the Master talking about body donation, he'd say to my sister and me: "After I die, scatter my ashes on a piece of land to nourish the earth. There is no need for a gravestone, and no need to visit me. I'll be gone from this world; there is no point in such a visit. The most important thing for you to do is to follow the Master closely and do things that benefit mankind. That would be the best way for you to honor your mother and me."

Because of the Master's teachings, we had come to realize that death is but a part of life. Our lives are like leaves: though they may thrive for a time on a tree, they eventually have to wither and fall. Because of the Dharma, my dad was able to exit this stage of life in peace and leave a legacy of love, kindness, and warmth.

By founding Tzu Chi, Master Cheng Yen creat-

ed a path everyone can follow, a path to doing good and living out the Dharma. She can always pinpoint the crux of a matter and explain it to us in a way we can understand. She guides those of us who have lost our way in life to the Bodhisattva Path, a path that allows us to benefit others as well as ourselves. By helping others, we tap into our compassion and realize the real meaning of Buddhism. In the process, it is as if a magic wand is waved over us and we discover the fountain of joy.

I'm full of gratitude to have encountered the Master and the Dharma. It has enabled me to uncover my innate goodness and helped me realize that kindness and purity of heart can help us beat all odds in life. I hope I can inspire kindness in more people as I serve others. Working together, we can spread love to the dark corners of the world. We can help those who are going through hard times in life to find their inner light and the strength to overcome their challenges.

Install the Buddhism app in your life. Then press that button that allows you to follow the Buddha's guidance and embark on a fulfilling life. ❀

# Aiding Filipinos Reeling From Multiple Disasters

Compiled by *Tzu Chi Monthly* editorial staff  
Edited and translated by Tang Yau-yang

*Typhoon Vamco slammed the Philippines on the heels of Typhoon Goni, exacerbating the plight of people already struggling to make a living during the COVID-19 pandemic.*



A bird's-eye view of eastern Metro Manila, the Philippines, revealed streets along the Marikina River inundated in muddy waters. Overly abundant rainfall brought by Typhoon Vamco, coupled with released reservoir water, had caused severe flooding in the region. "Looking out from a third-floor vantage point, only buildings taller than one story could be seen; the rest were submerged in flood water," according to reports from Tzu Chi volunteers in Marikina. They reported that people who had not evacuated in time were forced to retreat to the rooftops overnight to escape the rising flood waters.

Between September and November 2020, the Philippines were hit by a seemingly endless streak of typhoons and tropical depressions—ten of them in all. On November 1, Super Typhoon Goni, the world's strongest storm in 2020, slammed into the country at 225 kilometers per hour (140 miles/hour), severely damaging the Bicol region in southern Luzon. Despite the raging pandemic, Tzu Chi volunteers in Manila quickly mobilized to assess damage. Six volunteers were dispatched to Albay Province, a hard-hit area in Bicol. Joining local volunteer Antonio Tan (陳華民), they conducted a work relief program in the city of Tabaco through which typhoon victims cleaned up their

**An aerial view of Marikina in the aftermath of Typhoon Vamco.**

COURTESY OF LIN FU-YI



own homes and communities in exchange for cash from Tzu Chi.

Volunteers were still organizing relief work for Typhoon Goni when Typhoon Vamco hit on November 10, a mere ten days later. The Metro Manila area was badly pummeled this time around.

“Flooding in the aftermath of Vamco was even worse than that after Typhoon Ketsana in 2009,” said Henry Yunez (楊國英), CEO of Tzu Chi Philippines. “Many areas that had not been flooded before were inundated this time.” Typhoon Vamco hit the national capital of Manila and other areas after making a landfall on the eastern side of Metro Manila. Marikina in Metro Manila and San Mateo in Rizal were among the areas hit hard by the flash floods triggered by the typhoon.

As can be expected, the receding floodwaters revealed a staggering mess. Debris hung from utility poles and tree branches, thick layers of sludge covered the streets, and homes were inundated with mud, inside and out. Residents piled their damaged furniture and other household items onto the streets, adding to the devastated look of the affected cities and towns.

### **Work relief for triple the pay**

The two typhoons left a trail of damage in the central and southern parts of Luzon Island. Poor sanitation in the flooded areas would soon compound the actual damage from the flood, so it was essential to clean up immediately. The disaster areas were huge and it was too big of a job to be left to the government alone. Volunteers decided that helping residents clean up in the aftermath

**Volunteers assess damage in Tabaco, Albay, where Typhoon Goni has wreaked havoc.**

HUANG LIANG-LIANG

was the best way to speed up the recovery in the flooded areas. They split into multiple teams to assess the damage in disaster areas, then organized cash-for-work cleanup programs in Marikina, San Mateo, and the Province of Albay.

The programs were launched concurrently on November 14, just four days after Typhoon Vamco had made landfall. Participants were tasked with cleaning up their own homes and the streets in their own communities, for which Tzu Chi compensated them with a thousand pesos (US\$21) each day. Though that was about three times the average local daily pay, they were following the instructions of Master Cheng Yen to do all they could to help people suffering from the double whammy of the pandemic and the typhoons.

Many residents in Marikina were already familiar with Tzu Chi. When Typhoon Ketsana battered the city 11 years ago, Tzu Chi volunteers quickly offered work relief programs there, also to clean up the streets and homes in victimized communities. Foundation volunteers have continued to work in those communities ever since.

The cleanup events back then were a lot bigger and could log a thousand participants, but they were of a smaller scale this time, about 400 people per event. This was a constraint made necessary by the pandemic. At each event, volunteers informed the participants that they were able to receive one thousand pesos for each day they worked thanks to the generosity of loving donors

around the world.

It was essential to have proper trucks and earth-moving equipment to efficiently clear away the debris. The government provided some machinery to help, but it wasn't enough to handle the task, so volunteers scrambled to round up more. Participants also brought whatever personal work tools they could.

One act of goodwill begets more, and that was true in this situation as well. Earlier in the month, Tzu Chi volunteers had implemented a similar cash-for-work program in Batangas Province after Typhoon Goni had wreaked havoc there. Now a group of residents who had taken part in that program and received a timely infusion of money from Tzu Chi in exchange for cleaning up their own community had arrived in Marikina, ready to lend a hand. They wanted to demonstrate their gratitude to Tzu Chi and pay forward their love by helping victims of Typhoon Vamco restore their homes. "I finally understand why some people say it's better to give than to receive," said Patrick Arman, one of the helpers from Batangas, during a brief break from work.

Fema dela Rosa, 58, a resident of Malanday in Marikina, cried when she received a thousand pesos at the end of a workday. "We spent almost a whole day on our rooftop during the typhoon," she said. "The water ran rapidly below us, washing all our possessions away. The only thing we had left was the clothes on our backs." With the cash-for-work pay in hand, she could finally go buy some daily essentials.

## Local help

At the same time work was proceeding in Marikina, another group of Tzu Chi volunteers had organized additional cleanup and relief work in Albay Province. Areas in that province had suffered varying degrees of damage from Typhoon Goni. Some communities there had an urgent need to clear away volcanic ash slides while others had been hit so badly by mudslides that residents had been forced into shelters.

Because so many Tzu Chi volunteers in Manila were tied up dealing with the damage from Typhoon Vamco, only a small team of seven were available to help typhoon victims in Albay Province. The seven volunteers knew that they alone could not do the job well. Acting on Master Cheng Yen's suggestion, they worked to mobilize local residents to help when they arrived at the area.

On November 13, the small cadre of volunteers spread out to different areas in Albay Province to hold informational sessions about the relief work Tzu Chi was carrying out in the area. Such efforts proved fruitful; they successfully recruited more than a hundred additional volunteers. The local helpers were divided into 29 groups, who then fanned out to visit 49 villages in six towns. Their task was to assess damage and compile rosters of families for the cash distributions Tzu Chi was holding to help typhoon victims.

At the same time recipient rosters were being created, volunteers initiated a work relief program in Camalig, a town that had been hit hard by mudslides of volcanic ash. Before Typhoon Goni hit, some families in the town had purchased seasonal products to sell for the Christmas holidays, trying to bolster incomes hurt by the pandemic. Sadly, their stock of purchased goods was completely wiped out by the typhoon, leaving them in even worse financial shape. The money they earned through Tzu Chi's work relief program would be a big help to them.

On the last day of the program at Camalig, volunteers noticed a teenager leaning on a crutch by a post. He looked forlorn as he took in the ongoing cleanup activity around him. Volunteers talked to him and learned that his name was Reynan Brioso, age 15. He had trekked earlier that morning for three hours to reach Ilawod, the site



**In the aftermath of Typhoon Vamco, San Mateo residents clean up their own homes and communities in a work relief program sponsored by Tzu Chi.** YANG BI-FEN



of the cleanup that day, intending to take part in the event. But when he arrived at 9:00 a.m., the sign-up period had ended and the cleanup had already begun.

Brioso, one of 14 children in his family, had been born with a congenital defect in his right leg. The shy youngster told volunteers his asthmatic mother had not taken medicine for her condition for two months because they couldn't afford it. They desperately needed money to purchase medicine for her. Seeing his need and moved by compassion, volunteers invited him to help a cooking team prepare lunches for program participants. Brioso helped out by cutting vegetables and serving food to participants. At the end of the day, he received a thousand pesos for his service that he could take home to his family.

Alberto Manatlaw and his wife were also participants in dire need of the work relief pay. The couple's eldest son, Riovans, 19, had been blind since birth. This family of six had nothing to live

**Work relief participants wait for their pay after cleaning up the streets of San Mateo.**

GUO JIA-JIANG

on after the typhoon. "Typhoon Goni left our entire village covered in mud and boulders," Alberto explained. He and his wife were grateful for the opportunity to work for pay with which they could provide essentials for their family. Their son Riovans, though blind, also helped clean up their home.

More than 2,000 shifts were logged during the three-day work relief program in Camalig, or about 700 people per day. The mayor of Camalig, Carlos Irwin G. Baldo, Jr., came to the event venue on the last day to thank the foundation with a certificate of appreciation. "Although this certificate is just a thin piece of paper," the mayor said, "the sincerest gratitude of our entire town is behind it. Thank you for giving us the motivation to restore our homes."



### Relief cash at three banks

Tzu Chi followed the cash-for-work programs with aid distributions in some of the most severely damaged areas. Such distributions benefited more than 57,000 families.

The first wave of distributions was conducted in Albay Province. For four days beginning on November 18, Tzu Chi volunteers and local helpers worked in six towns in the province to distribute claim checks. Volunteers first verified the identity of each recipient and, depending on their family size, stamped a claim check one to three times—the more seals were affixed, the more cash a family could receive. The recipients could then go to one of three banks to exchange their claim checks for money. The amount they received ranged from 18,000 to 28,000 pesos (US\$375 to \$583).

The day after the distributions, the three banks that worked with Tzu Chi started to accept the claim checks and give out cash accordingly. Some aid recipients lived in areas farther away from the banks, so they slept in front of the banks the night before the cash was to be given out. They wanted the money provided by Tzu Chi in their hands as quickly as possible the next morning; they couldn't wait to use the money to start rebuilding their lives.

Wilfredo Rosero, clutching his claim check tightly, said, "The money from Tzu Chi will greatly help many people, especially people like me whose homes were totally destroyed in the typhoon. Receiving this is like receiving hope." Another recipient, Rosilyn Valdez, said, "Life is hard, really hard. I often cry because I'm the only

**More than a hundred residents in Albay Province helped Tzu Chi compile recipient rosters and carry out distributions of relief cash so that typhoon victims in their communities could receive the help they needed as soon as possible.** HUANG LIANG-LIANG

one left in my family to take care of my ailing mother... I couldn't believe we'd receive so much money from Tzu Chi. I can now use it to buy medicine for my mother."

### Metro Manila

In Metro Manila, volunteers worked hard to get cash aid to victims by Christmas. Some volunteers even gave up a full night of sleep to get the recipient rosters ready before the distributions so that the events could be held on schedule. When all was set, volunteers split into 14 groups to distribute claim checks or debit cards in Marikina and San Mateo to 40,000 families. The events began on December 8 and lasted for four days.

Many people on the rosters had thought they would be receiving relief goods at the distributions. When they arrived at a venue and learned that each household would be getting 15,000 to 25,000 pesos (US\$312 to \$520) instead of relief goods, they were so happy they broke into applause. Some even cried tears of joy. Volunteers couldn't help shedding a few tears too.

Many typhoon victims had been out of a job due to the pandemic. When the typhoons aggravated their financial struggles, they had no choice



but to take out loans at exorbitant interest rates to pay their living expenses. Now they were feeling the pressure from having to make the interest payments. The money from Tzu Chi really lifted their spirits.

Ariel Saysan was an example. He was months behind on his rent when the floods triggered by Typhoon Vamco submerged the first floor of his place. At his wits' end, he took out a loan to support his family. He was so strapped for cash it was easy to imagine his happiness when he learned he'd receive 25,000 pesos from Tzu Chi at the distribution. He was so grateful that he couldn't stop thanking the foundation.

Genova Lagos, 66 and a stroke survivor, had a disabled son and four grandchildren that a deceased daughter had left behind. The family hurried to a shelter when Typhoon Vamco hit. They returned home the following day, when the water had receded, only to find that the second floor of their home had collapsed. Everything they owned was soaked in mud. They didn't even have any food and had to subsist for days on what their neighbors could give them. When Lagos arrived at a Tzu Chi distribution, he couldn't believe he was receiving cash from the foundation. He had only one thought in mind: "I can finally repair my house."

Aida de Guzman, a Tzu Chi volunteer in Marikina, recalled her experience during Typhoon Vamco. She said that standing water started to form in Tumana, her neighborhood, at four o'clock in the morning that day. She reached for her backpack, which contained her Tzu Chi uniforms, and began to contact other volunteers so that they could go to help at a shelter. However, the rising water prevented her from even making it to the shelter. She ended up working with others to strip wood pieces from window frames so that they could make steps for people to escape to higher places. It wasn't until six o'clock in the evening, when the flood had subsided a bit, that they could come down.

Like others, Aida de Guzman was a typhoon victim, but she disregarded her own situation to work hard with other volunteers to help fellow victims. When Tzu Chi was finally distributing aid to survivors a month after the typhoon, she was so happy she cried. She was happy because meaningful relief was being given to those badly in need. When asked if she had received cash from the distribution, she said no. She pointed out that it was enough that her daughter's family had received the aid. She said she was easily contented, and that she had learned the virtue of content-

ment in Tzu Chi. "Master Cheng Yen is very compassionate. She has really helped many people this time around," she said. "I'm old, but I'll go anywhere where help is needed. I hope that the Master will give me strength so that I can work for Tzu Chi until my last breath."

## Recovery

"I wish to thank Tzu Chi on behalf of the 50,000 residents in Tumana," said Ziffred A. Ancheta, leader of the district. "I first witnessed the love and care of Tzu Chi volunteers the year Typhoon Ketsana hit. Now, 11 years later, Tzu Chi is still here with us. I'm very grateful. Due to the guidance of Tzu Chi volunteers, our residents have even learned to love each other more and be more proactive in helping others." His statement was supported by the generous outpouring of donations from aid recipients at the distributions. Many residents donated their spare change to Tzu Chi—they said the love of Tzu Chi had moved them into taking action to help others.

The mayor of Marikina, Marcelino R. Teodoro, had initially planned to attend just four of Tzu Chi's distributions, but what he saw at the first two distributions touched him so much that he decided to cancel all his other appointments for the rest of the day so that he could visit all ten distribution venues. Everywhere he went, he reminded recipients that they should wisely spend the money that they had received from Tzu Chi. They should use the money on their families, not on tobacco, alcohol, or gambling.

Tzu Chi Philippines CEO Henry Yunez shared some information with recipients. He said that Master Cheng Yen had called on Tzu Chi volunteers around the world to pray for the Philippines. He also said that people in more than 20 countries and areas had donated money to help the typhoon victims in the country, including needy people in Sri Lanka and Syrian refugees in Turkey. "I sincerely hope that all of you will cherish this outpouring of love and share your blessings with those who need help even more."

Some aid recipients used the cash from Tzu Chi to reopen their shops, others to buy food or repair their homes. Commerce and business activities began to return to affected areas as people worked hard to rebuild their lives and prepared to usher in a new year. "I hope I can get our house repaired before Christmas so that my family and I can spend the holidays at home," said Rex Den Padin. "I'm really thankful to all the people who donated money to help us." ❁

# After the Beirut Explosion

By Liao Zhe-min

Translated by Wu Hsiao-ting

Photos by Mohammed Nimr Aljamal

*A devastating explosion in Beirut, Lebanon, shocked the world in August 2020. Tzu Chi, with the help of the Foutowa Islamic Association, provided aid to impoverished families in the aftermath.*



On August 4, 2020, a massive explosion rocked Beirut, Lebanon's capital. The blast ripped through a large part of the city, and was, according to experts, one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in history. Over 200 people were killed and thousands more wounded. The blast zone was a wasteland of rubble and charred debris, the devastation so great that the scene was likened to one right out of Armageddon. The Lebanese economy has for years struggled under the weight of sectarian conflicts and the influx of Syrian refugees. The explosion just rubbed salt into those wounds.

After the blast, the Tzu Chi Foundation sought ways to help the survivors. Foundation volunteers

in Turkey eventually obtained the assistance of a charity organization in Lebanon, the Foutowa Islamic Association (FIA). With the help of FIA, Tzu Chi was finally able to offer five distributions in Jnah, an affected area in Beirut, in December 2020. The aid came none too soon for impoverished families there desperately in need of help.

## Poverty and illness

One way in which volunteers from FIA cooperated with Tzu Chi was to conduct home visits to establish recipient rosters for Tzu Chi distributions. One day, as the FIA volunteers were making their rounds, they encountered Noor, a three-year-old girl. She poked her head out a doorway and



The Port of Beirut (right) is one of the largest and busiest ports in the eastern Mediterranean. A massive explosion, triggered by improperly stored ammonium nitrate, occurred there in August 2020. When Tzu Chi responded to the disaster by holding aid distributions in the city a few months later in December, the damage caused by the blast was still clearly evident.





asked an FIA volunteer: “Could I have that piece of paper [a home visit form]?” The volunteer responded, “A form like this is for adults to fill out.” But the girl was not one to give up easily. She pursued by saying, “But I’m very hungry too. Could you take a picture of me and then give me something to eat?”

Noor’s questions and her plight wrenched the hearts of the volunteers. They snapped a photo of her, then sent the picture to Tzu Chi volunteers in Turkey. Tzu Chi Turkey later used the photo of Noor on the cover of an Arabic version of the *Tzu Chi Monthly* magazine.

The FIA volunteers’ visit to Noor’s building had taken place in October 2020. Two months later, in December, three Tzu Chi volunteers from Turkey arrived in Lebanon to take part in the upcoming distributions. “I’ve been through war in my country,” said Ahmed Aliyan, one of the volunteers, “but the devastation caused by the explosion in Beirut was worse than anything I’ve ever seen.”

Aliyan was the deputy principal of El Menahil International School, an institution for Syrian refugee children established by Tzu Chi and the government of the Sultangazi district of Istanbul. Aliyan had fled the war in Syria, his home country,

**Volunteers from the Foutowa Islamic Association helped Tzu Chi conduct distributions to the needy after the explosion. Every family received 29 kilograms of food, enough to last them for a month.**

in 2013. He arrived in Lebanon, before eventually moving on to Turkey and settling down in that country. Despite being a highly educated intellectual, he had to take factory jobs in Turkey to make a living. He became a Tzu Chi volunteer after receiving aid from the foundation in 2015.

Despite having experienced war firsthand, Aliyan was shocked by his visit to Beirut, where the destruction wreaked by the explosion was still very visible. Many buildings were badly damaged, with broken windows shielded by drapes. “It looked like this within a radius of five kilometers [3.1 miles] of the blast,” he said. “The sight was heart-wrenching.”

Aliyan and his fellow volunteers arrived at a slum area in San Simon, Jnah, to visit some needy families. The slum was home to refugees from Palestine and Syria as well as some local destitute people. An area like this is usually out of bounds for foreigners; it was only through the help of local



## A synopsis of Tzu Chi's aid to needy families in Beirut, Lebanon



- Lebanon is located in Western Asia and has a population of over 6.8 million. The country shares borders with Syria and Israel.
- Lebanon has endured years of frequently violent political conflict since it gained independence in 1946. A wide gap exists between the rich and poor, and unemployment is high among the younger population. On August 4, 2020, a devastating blast in Beirut destroyed large swathes of the city, leaving hundreds of thousands of people homeless. The explosion also destroyed grain silos, worsening food shortages caused by the coronavirus pandemic.
- Tzu Chi sent aid to the nation following the explosion with the assistance of the Foutowa Islamic Association (FIA). Established in 1974, FIA is dedicated to aiding destitute families and helping underprivileged students go to college.
- Tzu Chi volunteers from Istanbul, Turkey, arrived in Beirut in December 2020. Working with FIA volunteers, they held five distributions on December 12 and 13 in San Simon, Jnah, an area affected by the explosion. Four hundred families benefited from the distributions. Lebanon is the 117th country that has received aid from Tzu Chi.

neighborhood leaders that the volunteers were able to visit the needy here.

What the volunteers saw in the slum saddened them even more. Standing water and trash were everywhere on the streets. Shabby, disorderly buildings contained tightly packed housing units. Every home was damp and cramped, with bathroom and kitchen facilities and places to sleep all squeezed together. "They looked like places for animals instead of people," Aliyan said, recalling the dismal scene.

A woman who appeared to be in her 60s lived in one of the units. When the volunteers arrived, she was surprised and suspicious. "What do you want?" she asked warily. She couldn't believe they had come to help her. A cleaning lady by profession, she suffered from a respiratory disease and required the use of a ventilator. However, she hadn't paid her utility bills in two months and so her electricity had been cut off. Her life was in danger, but she told the visitors she had placed her life in the hands of Allah.

Another resident was a 50-year-old man, a victim of diabetes. His lungs were compressed by the fluid that had accumulated in his abdomen, preventing him from working. As a result, he had no

money to seek medical attention. His older brother had died, and he had only his sister-in-law to take care of him. Getting by was extremely hard, and he often had to go without food. He also had a thyroid condition that needed surgery, but the operation would cost nearly a million Lebanese pounds (US\$663). "I don't even have a thousand pounds [US\$0.66]," the man lamented.

Yet another resident was a young father. The man had suffered a bad cut on his foot. The wound had been sutured, but it continued to show signs of infection and was very painful. Despite that, the man had to continue working to support his family.

"The locals who showed us around told us that what we had seen and the people we had met were just a tiny fraction of the local poor population that needed help," said Sayed Alhomsy, another volunteer from Turkey. His heart was heavy from all that he had witnessed. Like Ahmed Aliyan, Alhomsy was also a Syrian refugee. He said, "When I return to Turkey, I'll tell every Syrian family I know that life might be hard for them, but people here have it worse. I'll also let them know that their donations had been put to good use helping these families."

## Rising from the rubble

Five Tzu Chi distributions were held on two days in December 2020, benefiting 400 families. Alhomsy oversees distribution affairs at the Tzu Chi Turkey office. Before the distributions, he shared with FIA volunteers the guiding spirit for Tzu Chi volunteers and how the foundation conducts its distributions. "We treat our aid recipients with respect," he explained. "Instead of thinking that we are in a higher position than they are [because we are the aid givers], we regard them as our family. We make them feel at home with a smile." He also shared how he and other Tzu Chi volunteers in Turkey had been exposed to the Tzu Chi spirit of Great Love and how they had learned to live it out.

"I'm touched by these volunteers from FIA," said Alhomsy. "Their day jobs are tiring enough, but they still sacrifice what time off they have to serve others. They all embrace a passion for serving others and hope they can do more."

Due to a local shortage of personal protective equipment, the Tzu Chi volunteers from Turkey, well versed in conducting distributions, showed the FIA volunteers how to set up circulation routes and place chairs far apart enough to allow social distancing.

Bag after bag of rice, lentils, chickpeas, and powdered milk blanketed the desks at the venue. Every family was eligible to receive 29 kilograms (64 pounds) of food. Other aid items included blankets and gas-fueled heaters. Tzu Chi also provided face masks because of the pandemic.

People left the distributions smiling, laden with the gifts they had received from Tzu Chi. Alhomsy asked an elderly man at the first distribution if he was happy. The man responded with a sincere expression: "I hope Allah bestows joy on you all!"

Volunteers told participating families at each distribution that the Philippines had recently been pummeled by Typhoons Goni and Vamco, and that Tzu Chi volunteers were working hard there to help those affected. Hearing about the assistance that Tzu Chi was rendering elsewhere moved many aid recipients to action. Many took out money from their pockets and donated it to Tzu Chi to help with the foundation's relief operations for the typhoons. Some turned to others beside them and asked, "Can you lend me a little money to donate to Tzu Chi? I'll return it to you later." Even Noor, the three-year-old girl mentioned earlier in this article, donated her father's pay for half a day's work to Tzu Chi. When she



**Tzu Chi volunteers from Turkey visited Noor (second from left), a three-year-old girl in San Simon, Beirut. Noor's photo was featured on the cover of an Arabic version of *Tzu Chi Monthly*.**

and her dad deposited their donation into a coin bank held out by a volunteer, those around the pair said to them, "May Allah give you a bountiful reward for your kindness!"

After seeing people donating what they could to help typhoon victims in the Philippines, Mohammed Nimr Aljamal, one of the volunteers from Turkey, said that he hoped that the help from Tzu Chi will inspire the aid recipients to reach out when they meet people in need of help in the future, in the same way that Syrian refugees in Turkey had done after they were aided by Tzu Chi.

FIA has been helping impoverished people in Lebanon for nearly half a century. Ziyad al-Saheb, head of FIA, was happy that his organization could work with Tzu Chi to serve local needy people. "I feel from the bottom of my heart that the spirit demonstrated by Tzu Chi—humanitarianism, benevolence, mutual help, and unconditional giving—is the same spirit Islam has taught me," he said. "Such spirit embodies the love we humans should embrace for each other."

A civil war that lasted from 1975 to 1990, persistent political dysfunction, and economic instability have led to the poor state of the country's infrastructure and a wide gap between the rich and the poor. The explosion only added to the challenges facing the country. Tzu Chi reached out to help after the tragedy, abiding by the belief that the hope of mankind comes from mutual help. It's with love and help that hope rises from the rubble. ❀

# Managing the Risk Factors for Strokes

By Ng Hooi Lin

Abridged and translated by Wu Hsiao-ting

Photo by Hsiao Yiu-hwa

*Stroke is not just a disease of the elderly. It can affect young people too. Though older people are at a higher risk of a stroke, an unhealthy lifestyle is an even bigger contributing factor for the disease.*

One day a friend told me dejectedly that his mother had had a stroke. A blood vessel had ruptured in her brain, leading to a hemorrhagic stroke. He said that his mother was perfectly normal one moment, but almost completely immobilized the next, after the stroke hit. Later on, she couldn't even perform the simplest tasks, such as taking a shower, feeding herself, or going to the bathroom. My friend found the drastic change in her hard to accept.

Aside from feeling sad for his mother, her sudden collapse had led my friend to worry about his own health.

My friend was a big meat eater and partial to heavily seasoned food. I vividly remember several years ago when we dined together the deeply satisfied look on his face after he had gulped down the last drop of a curry soup from a large bowl. He told me at the time that he had put on so much weight as he had gotten older that it was no longer healthy. Hearing him confess his dilemma, I advised him to watch his diet and go easy on greasy and heavily seasoned foods.

He responded: "I simply can't resist the temptation of delicious food, especially when it is right under my nose. For me it's always 'Dive in and worry about losing weight later.'"

Who could have predicted that his attitude about food would take an about-face when his mother suffered a stroke? He asked me, a dietician, in all seriousness: "Are strokes hereditary? What am I to do if I suffer a stroke too when I get old? What food should I avoid? What food can I eat?" His about-face took me by surprise.

Since I became a dietician, when the topic of how to prevent stroke or other chronic illnesses

comes up, the focus has almost always been on "how to eat right," as if a stroke is completely preventable as long as one eats right.

And when it comes to eating right, the questions most often posed to me are: "What should I eat?" and "What should I avoid?" It is as though food is divided into two kinds: the kind that will induce chronic illness—the so-called "bad food," and the kind that will make you healthy—the so-called "good food."

It is, however, a misconception to think that you will keep a stroke at bay if you eat only the so-called good food.

## Not the exclusive province of the old

Another misconception about stroke is that it only affects older people. Take my friend for example. He worried about being hit by a stroke in his old age. Sadly, strokes are not the exclusive province of the old; one of my friends was younger than 35 years old when he had a stroke. Though older people are indeed more susceptible to a stroke, an unhealthy lifestyle is an even bigger contributing factor. The best way to protect yourself from a stroke is to understand your risk and how to control it.

One time during a talk about how to prevent a stroke, I mentioned that the risk factors of a stroke can be classified into two categories: uncontrollable and controllable. The examples I gave for the uncontrollable kind included family history, age, and sex (males are more susceptible).

A member of the audience said to me jokingly, "No one can become young again; I can't go back to being a 20-year-old. I can't change my sex either. Does that mean that my fate is sealed?" He



was only half right, of course. Though one cannot control one's age or sex, there are reversible factors, including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, heart and blood vessel diseases, obesity, drinking, and smoking.

By focusing on mitigating the risk factors under our control, we can take steps to lower our chances of having a stroke. They include undergoing regular checkups to determine our risk and what to do next, eating healthy, exercising regularly at a moderate intensity, and quitting smoking.

During another talk of mine, a member in the audience asked if vegetarians were immune from stroke. I was puzzled by the expression on his face when he posed the question, so I inquired as to why he had asked it. He told me that he was the lay disciple of a Buddhist monk who had recently suffered a stroke. Thinking that vegetarians were immune from strokes, he began to suspect his master had been eating foods he shouldn't have.

I told him eating vegetarian is not a sure guarantee against a stroke. If a vegetarian consumes too many high-fat and salty foods, he or she is as susceptible as a meat eater to obesity, high blood pressure, and diabetes—the medical conditions that can increase one's risk for a stroke. In addition to diet, genetic factors can also contribute to a stroke.

I advised my audience to adopt a correct

**Eating a healthy diet can minimize your risk of a stroke, but it's also important to understand other risk factors to increase your chances of keeping a stroke at bay.**

understanding of what might lead to a stroke and adjust their lifestyle habits accordingly to reduce their risk of having a stroke.

### **Time is of the essence**

Right before the Chinese New Year holiday a few years ago, my mom, who was in her 80s and lived alone, came to my home for a short stay. A couple of days after she arrived, she told my husband and me she was experiencing a sudden blurriness in her right eye and weakness in her limbs. Her weakness was such that she couldn't even stand or hold a pair of chopsticks in her hand. I immediately rushed her to the hospital, where she was diagnosed with an ischemic stroke. (An ischemic stroke is the most common type of stroke. It occurs when a vessel supplying blood to the brain is blocked.)

In this case, my husband and I took action immediately upon suspecting my mother had had a stroke. That's because it's critical for a stroke victim to get medical attention right away. Time lost is brain lost—every minute counts. Immediate treatment is essential to minimizing



the long-term effects of a stroke and improving one's prognosis.

That's why it is so important that you and your family recognize the signs of a stroke, so you can take immediate measures should one occur. Common symptoms include a sudden weakness or numbness in the arm, leg, or face (usually on one side of the body); sudden trouble speaking or slurred speech; sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes; headache or dizziness with no known cause; and sudden trouble walking or loss of balance.

For decades, my mother had led a healthy lifestyle. She had annual checkups, abstained from smoking and drinking, and kept her diet simple and food mildly seasoned. She maintained an exercise routine, getting up every day before it was light for walks outdoors or other workouts. She was popular with relatives and friends. When the news of her stroke spread, many people came to see her. Most of her visitors were surprised by what had happened. They couldn't understand how such a health-conscious person as my mom could have suffered a stroke. Some of them even began to question the necessity of a healthy lifestyle—what's the use of eating healthy and exercising regularly if a stroke was inevitable? Some even advised me to stop restricting my mom's diet. They thought that I, as a dietician, must have had quite a say in her diet and had tried to control what she ate.

Later, I had a conversation with my mom alone. I said to her, "Some of our relatives said that you'd been vigilant about your diet for decades and yet you couldn't escape the fate of a stroke. They said if you had known all along, you should have just eaten whatever you wanted to eat. What do you think?"

"It was their way of expressing their concern," Mom said. "Don't take to heart what they said. We can't ask everyone to see eye to eye with us in everything. My personal feeling is that if I hadn't tried my best to lead a healthy life, a stroke might have happened to me much earlier in my life than it did."

I then asked if the stroke had changed her attitude about her diet choices and if she now felt that since she was advanced in years, she should just eat whatever she wanted. She answered with a smile: "No matter how old we are, we should all try to eat as healthy as possible."

I knew of patients who ignored their stroke symptoms, thinking that they were just too tired and that they would be fine again after they rested up. Out of curiosity, I asked Mom, "You said on

the day of your stroke that you suspected you had had a stroke. I figured you wouldn't have known what to look for. What made you think you had had a stroke?"

Her answer surprised me. She said that she once visited a relative who had been hit by a stroke and saw how she lay paralyzed in her bed and had to depend on her child for all her needs. Her child had even quit her job to take care of her. The stroke had made things very difficult for them. "Looking at them, my heart really went out to them. At the same time, I couldn't help thinking: 'What if I end up like her?'"

My mom asked the child about the symptoms of a stroke and committed them to her memory. That's why she wasted no time in seeking help when she noticed a sudden blurriness in her right eye and a sudden weakness in the right side of her body. Her vigilance had saved her.

### **Working hard on physical therapy**

My mom worked hard on her physical and speech therapies to recover from the stroke. She also tried as much as possible to feed herself, brush her own teeth, and take care of her other needs. She needed some assistance from me in the beginning, but by and by was able to take care of everything on her own.

One day, when I asked her to leave a bowl she had used in the sink, she said to me, "Let me try to wash it myself." Less than two minutes later, she said to me with a smile, "I'm done." The happy smile on her face was no different from that of my daughter's when she first learned how to fold clothes at three years old. I complimented Mom on having done a good job, and she said, "I don't want to rely on others to take care of me. I must get better."

Even though she was making very good progress, we knew that she still needed to be careful lest she have a second stroke. She needed to watch her diet, get regular exercise, take her meds, etc. to reduce the risk of another stroke occurring.

I remember a patient once said to me: "Everyone's lifespan is predetermined. We should enjoy life and eat freely while we still can, and worry about restricting our intake of salt, oil, and sugar after we get sick." Interestingly, I also have had a patient say to me: "Having lived to my age, I've eaten almost everything I wanted to eat. For the rest of my days, I'll eat healthy and watch what I put into my mouth. I don't want to become a burden to my children."

I know whose example I want to follow. ❁

# The JING SIA Illustrated APHORISMS



## The Buddha says:

You should renounce yourself for your family, renounce your family for your village, renounce your village for your country, and renounce everything to become a buddha.

To save the world, we must save people's minds. When their minds are sincere, they will behave properly. This is what Confucius meant when he said, "First cultivate yourself, then establish harmony in your family, then bring order to your country, and finally bring peace to the world."

If you want your family to be peaceful, you must first cultivate yourself. With a peaceful family, you can influence other families. When every family lives in harmony, the whole world will be peaceful and joyful.



**Life is like the wick of a candle: the more it burns, the brighter it becomes. The candle, however, will sometimes stain the glass around it with black smoke.**

Dharma Master Cheng Yen said: "The candle itself is pure, but its light can only be produced through a chemical process which also produces pollution. It is the same with our spiritual life. Our bodies are merely illusory, transitory things, but without them we would not be able to save all living beings. However, with our bodies it is hard to avoid attachment and pollution."

Translated by E. E. Ho and W. L. Rathje; drawings by Tsai Chih-chung; coloring by May E. Gu

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*One who gives with expectations of repayment will be miserable if the expectations are not met; even if one receives what one wishes for the happiness gained will be short-lived.*

*—Dharma Master Cheng Yen*

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