

慈濟

Tzu Chi

Buddhism in Action

A Flood of Mud, a Surge of Love

After a Barrier Lake
Overflowed in Taiwan



Removing sticky mud is backbreaking work, yet volunteers of all ages, working in sync, steadily clear homes for those affected.

WEI GUO-LIN

When Kindness Flows

Translated by Teresa Chang

Life is impermanent—this is a constant truth, and a reminder I often share. This reality was underscored once again in late September, when torrential rains brought by Typhoon Ragasa caused a barrier lake in Hualien to overflow, sending torrents of muddy water surging into Guangfu Township. The devastation was unimaginable: Roads were cut off, a large bridge collapsed, and communities were submerged in mud. Lives were lost or went missing, leaving everyone deeply saddened. Fortunately, many people acted swiftly, heading straight to Guangfu to turn their love into action. Through their efforts, we witnessed genuine kindness flowing from the Taiwanese people.

People converged on Hualien shortly after the disaster, filling Guangfu Station. They came from all over Taiwan and weren't necessarily Tzu Chi volunteers; anyone carrying a shovel or cleaning tools made it clear they had come to help. Despite the large crowds, there was no clamor or chaos. Guided by a sincere wish to assist, everyone moved in an orderly manner.

People often say, "Hualien's soil is sticky." Many might take this as a figure of speech [meaning that Hualien is a place you don't want to leave], but anyone who has shoveled the mud in Guangfu knows it's literally true. The mud clings like malt syrup, making it extremely difficult to remove. It's so thick that when you step in it, your boots are nearly impossible to lift—sometimes you even need someone walking behind you to help pull your feet free. Yet in this harsh environment, volunteers entered residents' homes to clean living rooms, kitchens, bathrooms, and bedrooms, and to help move cabinets and furniture, all in the hope of helping families' lives return to normal. However tiring the work, their fatigue was only physical; in their hearts and minds, they felt peace and joy from being able to give.

Those who help disaster victims clean and restore their homes, easing their distress in times of misfortune—aren't such people true bodhisattvas? The residents of Guangfu were, for the most part, strangers

to these volunteers. Yet each helper acted out of compassion, unable to stand by in the face of others' suffering. That compassion is the very embodiment of the Buddha's heart. When others experience hardship, actively reaching out to offer help is to walk the Bodhisattva Path. Every shovel lifted and every bucket carried reflected a single, pure thought: to help victims find relief. Truly, their merit is immeasurable.

The true treasure of Taiwan lies in the kindness and love of its people. This is the kind of love that transcends self and others, inspiring sincere giving. I am deeply grateful to all who came to Guangfu with such open hearts. Each person contributed while also expressing gratitude toward fellow volunteers, working together to bring meaningful aid to those affected. Every volunteer acted with steadfast resolve, doing with their whole hearts whatever needed to be done. Such goodness and love are truly precious—a remarkable source of stability and strength in trying times.

Though the emergency relief phase has ended, our care for the residents of Guangfu must continue. Long-term support for families in need is essential. In today's world, we need good people and good deeds to purify hearts and nurture a harmonious society. Whatever we are able to do, we should do mindfully, helping to create a world that flourishes in peace and safety. One person alone cannot accomplish this, but when many join hands, even the heaviest burdens can be lifted.

I feel deep joy knowing that Taiwan is blessed with so many warmhearted people. Every bodhisattva who extended a helping hand in Guangfu will surely carry this experience in their hearts, and even those who could only watch on television or online could feel this current of love. Now that this mission of compassion has come to completion, I offer my sincerest gratitude to all. May good deeds and good people continue to come together to safeguard our world, keeping love alive and enduring through all time. ❀

Tzu Chi

Bimonthly

November 2025



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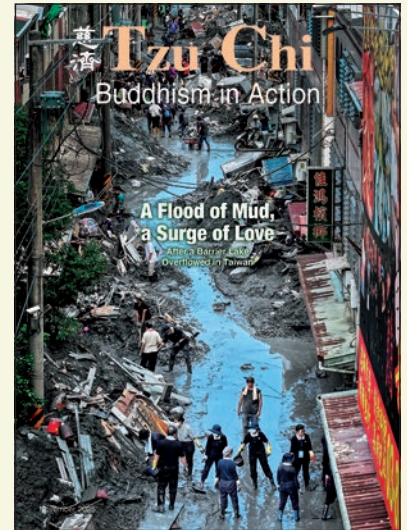
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Photo by Chen Li Shao-min

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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.

Address: No. 8, Lide Road, Beitou District, Taipei City 11259, Taiwan.

Telephone: 886-2-2898-9000 ext 2001

E-mail: 004741@daaitv.com

Tzu Chi Bimonthly

Publisher

Shih Cheng Yen

Managing Editor

Wu Hsiao-ting

Editors

Steven Turner, Jennifer Shaw

Volunteer Translator

Teresa Chang

Designers

Chiu Yu-sheng, Huang Chao-ning,
Tsai Ya-chun

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Wang Tuan-cheng, CEO

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Tzu Chi Event Highlights

Aug. 22 to Oct. 21, 2025

Kazakhstan

- The 8th Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions convened in Astana from September 17 to 18, hosting representatives from 60 countries and regions. Debra Boudreaux (曾慈慧), Tzu Chi's chief international affairs officer, participated as a representative of the Buddhist community, following a recommendation from the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations. She spoke on the role of religion in fostering global harmony in the 21st century.

Myanmar

- Tzu Chi volunteers have provided support by distributing rice and cooking oil for more than six months since a major earthquake struck Mandalay on March 28. By October, their relief efforts had also resulted in the construction of 273 temporary classrooms, along with the donation of 11,493 sets of school supplies, 1,766 desk-and-chair sets, and 125 whiteboards.

Sri Lanka

- The cost of prescription glasses in Sri Lanka, ranging from 8,000 to 10,000 rupees (about US\$25–30), poses a considerable burden for low-income families. On October 9, volunteers visited Bingiriya Divisional Hospital in North Western Province to fulfill a promise made during a free clinic in August, providing free eyeglasses to 231 residents.

Thailand



- Tzu Chi Thailand has long provided charitable aid and medical care to refugees and stateless individuals, reaching over 10,000 people. Its work has been recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and in September, the two organizations formally began their partnership by exchanging letters.

According to a UNHCR report released in April this year, 3,526 refugees and 2,774 asylum seekers in urban areas of Thailand still require assistance.

The Philippines



- A magnitude 6.9 earthquake struck Cebu on September 30, killing over 70 people and causing massive damage. Despite transportation challenges, Tzu Chi volunteers from Manila and Cebu reached the disaster area on October 5. Their first distribution was held in Libaong, San Remigio—a remote community that had received little attention—where they provided food, bottled water, hygiene supplies, medicines, and eco-blankets to 422 households. A large-scale distribution of financial aid and rice is planned for Bogo City, near the epicenter.
- Typhoon Bualoi hit the central Philippines on September 25, bringing strong winds and heavy rain that triggered flooding. The Ormoc Great Love Village in Leyte Province was inundated, forcing over a thousand residents to evacuate. Despite being affected themselves, Tzu Chi volunteers began serving hot meals and distributing clothing in the village at four o'clock the next morning. On October 12, three distributions provided 1,200 households with folding beds, eco-blankets, and rice.



Charity



Medicine



Education



Mozambique



- After Cyclone Idai devastated Mozambique in 2019, Tzu Chi helped build four permanent housing villages and 23 schools. The entire project is expected to be completed by 2027. On September 3, a joint handover ceremony was held for ten schools in Sofala Province, while a separate ceremony marked the delivery of 840 homes in the Guara-Guara Great Love Village. Mozambique's President Daniel Chapo personally attended both ceremonies, honoring Tzu Chi's dedication and expressing his gratitude.

Zimbabwe



- Following the 2022 opening of a Tzu Chi Jing Si Hall in South Africa, the groundbreaking ceremony for Africa's second Jing Si Hall was held on September 7 in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe. The new facility will serve as a key Tzu Chi hub, offering vocational training, free medical services, and Tzu Chi group study sessions.
- Zimbabwe's Tzu Chi well-drilling team is now government-certified. Seventy-one of the nearly 150 team members earned certification through a course offered by the Rural Infrastructure Development Agency. Founded in 2013 to provide safe water, the team had drilled or repaired over 4,000 wells as of October 17.



Palestine

- In response to the Israel-Hamas conflict, Tzu Chi Türkiye and El Menahil International School launched a fundraising campaign to provide hot meals in Gaza. In cooperation with the Taipei Grand Mosque and facilitated by the mosque foundation's chairman, Yaser Cheng (鄭泰祥), and his friends in the Gaza Strip, they began serving meals on September 26 for local youth and children in Az-Zawayda, located in central Gaza. By October 6, a total of 8,500 meals had been served.

Following the ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas conflict on October 10, Tzu Chi Jordan is partnering with the Jordan Hashemite Charity Organization and the Royal Medical Services to deliver antibiotics, dialysis medications, and other medical supplies to two field hospitals in Gaza by the end of this year. Additional aid, including eco-blankets and food, will also be provided.

Acting on information provided by Medical Aid for Palestinians, Tzu Chi volunteers in Jordan also held a free dental clinic in Amman on October 16, providing care for 107 refugees, 80 of whom required follow-up treatment.

A smiling girl sits on a Tzu Chi folding bed her family received after severe flooding caused by a 2018 dam collapse in Laos.

HSIAO YIU-HWA

SHANGHAI HYUNDAI				
INTERNAL LENGTH	19' 4"	7.32M	5000 A MM	
INTERNAL WIDTH	7' 8"	19.32M	2352 MM	
INTERNAL HEIGHT	7' 10"	11.64M	2352 MM	
DOOR OPENING WIDTH	7' 8"	19.32M	2340 MM	
DOOR OPENING HEIGHT	7' 5"	49.64M	2280 MM	
MODEL NO.	HP - 10C - 111181			
SHANGHAI HYUNDAI CONTAINER MANUFACTURING CO., LTD				



Tzu Chi and the SDGs

Recycling Resources, Sustaining Love

For more than 20 years, Tzu Chi has been developing practical supplies for disaster relief. Made primarily from recycled plastics, these items reduce environmental impact while supporting humanitarian aid, creating a circular economy that aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals of "Climate Action" and "Responsible Consumption and Production."



Eco-Friendly + Charitable

Tzu Chi's Seven Treasures of Disaster Relief

Two essential Tzu Chi relief items—the blanket and the multifunctional folding bed, both crafted from recycled materials—have been deployed in disasters ranging from the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines to Taiwan's 2024 Hualien earthquake, Typhoon Gaemi, and the 2025 Myanmar earthquake.

Expanding on those two items, Tzu Chi has developed folding tables and chairs, mosquito nets, privacy cubicles, and storage containers. Together, these items can be quickly set up in a shelter following a disaster to create a dignified, private living space.

PHOTOS BY HSIAO YIU-HWA



1 Stackable Wheeled Storage Container Set

- Containers are conveniently wheeled and can support up to 20 kg; multiple containers can be stacked to form a larger storage unit.
- Made from recycled polypropylene (PP) with an extendable aluminum handle frame.
- Includes clothing hangers made from recycled PP, so a stacked set can function as a wardrobe.

2 Privacy Cubicle

- Folds for easy transport and expands quickly; covers about 6 m² and provides opaque privacy screening.

- Made with a spring steel frame and 280 recycled PET bottles.

3 Multifunctional Folding Bed

- Opens manually into a single bed or can be reconfigured as a seat.
- Weighs 15 kg and supports up to 150 kg.
- Made from recycled PP and stainless-steel tubing.

4&5 Folding Table and Chair

- Perforated design; folds quickly for easy storage.
- Made from recycled PP and stainless-steel tubing.

6 Mosquito Net (Single)

- Can be placed on a Tzu Chi folding bed or hung separately; treated with natural mosquito repellent.
- Made from 20 recycled PET bottles.

7 Blanket

- Warm and quick-drying; over 1.39 million distributed worldwide.
- Measures 230 cm × 180 cm; made from 67 recycled PET bottles.





Shelter in One Minute

By Yeh Tzu-hao

Translated by Wu Hsiao-ting

Tzu Chi's One-Minute Indoor Shelter System delivers privacy, comfort, and sustainability, combining thoughtful design with innovation for disaster relief anywhere in the world.

In August 2010, unusually heavy monsoon rains caused the Indus River in Pakistan to overflow, unleashing massive floods. The disaster destroyed 1.9 million homes and affected more than 20 million people. Just a couple of months later, a baby girl was born in Thatta, Sindh Province, into a family that had lost everything. When Tzu Chi volunteers assessed the damage in the area, they found her parents living in a makeshift shelter of cloth and wooden sticks. The newborn had nothing more than a straw mat and a bedsheet to separate her from the damp ground.

When Dharma Master Cheng Yen saw footage of the family's plight, she immediately instructed the relief team to improve living conditions for survivors. At the very least, they needed beds to keep them off the ground. With time short and demand high, the team turned to American volunteer Zhang Yi-lang (張義朗), asking him to fast-track into production a modular bed he was developing.

By the end of 2010, more than 9,600 bed sets had been shipped to Pakistan. The frames were made by interconnecting long, narrow plastic slats in a grid. When finished, the structure raised the sleeping surface a mere ten centimeters (about four inches) above the ground. Though intended as a temporary solution, they were greeted with cheers from survivors. Even in tents, a bed meant people could finally sleep more comfortably.

The experience in Pakistan underscored the

importance of proper shelter essentials. Master Cheng Yen entrusted further design work to Marshall Siao (蔡思一), who had grown up in a Tzu Chi family in the Philippines. He was working in Tzu Chi's construction department on hospital projects at the time, but the new challenge set him on a different path—one of industrial design, dedicated to creating practical tools for people in need.

Siao recalled his early idea for a bed: "My thinking was already leaning toward a folding design, which is very different from an assembly-type bed. Assembly takes time, and if someone isn't familiar with the process, they might put it together incorrectly. Instead, I tried to make it as simple as possible: no tools, reusable, and easy to transport."

He began by studying past designs, weighing the strengths and weaknesses of metal-frame beds, camp cots, air mattresses, and more. After evaluating their suitability for disaster relief, he realized he needed to chart an entirely new course.

Overseas debut

To ensure the beds could withstand harsh conditions, including floodwaters, without warping or rusting, Siao chose food-grade polypropylene (PP) combined with stainless-steel tubing. This made the beds durable, water-resistant, and easy to clean and disinfect. But before the design was finalized and mass production could begin, several challenges needed to be addressed.



The first prototype weighed more than 20 kilograms (45 pounds) and was uncomfortable to lie on in hot weather. To improve it, Siao added rows of round ventilation holes and lowered the height to under 30 centimeters (12 inches), striking a balance between strength, weight, and airflow. After repeated refinements, the bed reached its final form: 15 kilograms (33 pounds), the size of a narrow single bed when unfolded, yet folding down compactly for easy transport. It could also be reconfigured into seating. The design took three years of research and adjustment before beginning mass production in 2013.

The bed's first major test came that November, when Super Typhoon Haiyan devastated the central Philippines. Tzu Chi volunteers in Taiwan and the Philippines mobilized large-scale relief efforts, and the bed's collapsible, trans-

In 2010, Pakistan was hit by the flood of the century. In October, a Tzu Chi relief team visited Thatta, Sindh Province, and found a 15-day-old baby girl living with her parents under a makeshift cloth shelter propped on wooden sticks.

HSIAO YIU-HWA

port-friendly design quickly proved its value. Siao recalled that while all three of his siblings joined frontline relief efforts in the Philippines, he remained at Tzu Chi's headquarters in Hualien, Taiwan. "Because the bed was new," he said, "I had to handle the logistics—how to package and ship them in large quantities." Thanks to its design, a single 40-foot shipping container could hold up to 500 folding beds, compared to just 20 or 30 conventional sets.

In typhoon-stricken communities, the beds

provided survivors with a safe, comfortable place to rest. They were even given as housewarming gifts to families moving into the temporary homes of Tzu Chi's Great Love Village in Ormoc. In addition to Asia, the folding bed has since been deployed in the Americas, Europe, and Africa.

Its durability was later proven in Taiwan itself. In July 2024, after Typhoon Gaemi, volunteers visiting Tainan's Baihe District saw a resident pressure-washing a folding bed his family had received from Tzu Chi in 2018, when floods had ruined their furniture. Although the regular bed the family later purchased was badly damaged by Gaemi, the folding bed had survived—after a wash and some sun, it was ready to use again.

The bed has since received Germany's Red Dot Design Award, along with other international honors. For this and his other practical designs serving both in disaster relief and everyday life, Siao was awarded the Special Award for Outstanding Overseas Chinese Youth as part of Taiwan's Ten Outstanding Young Persons program. Yet he humbly attributes all success to the greatest "designer" in his heart.

"These inventions all arise from Master Cheng Yen's wisdom," Siao said respectfully. "We simply brought them into being through our hands."

Building the system

The folding bed was only the beginning; next came folding tables and chairs, equally easy to transport and set up. Piece by piece, Siao's work evolved into a more complete system. But the earthquake that struck Hualien on February 6, 2018, showed that much remained to be done.

"At that time, many people were afraid of aftershocks and didn't dare stay in their homes," Siao recalled. "Nuns from the Jing Si Abode and Tzu Chi volunteers immediately delivered hot meals and folding beds to the shelters. The Master also asked me to visit the shelters to assess additional ways to help survivors."

Hundreds of survivors had gathered at Hualien Stadium. Folding beds and blankets from Tzu Chi were in place, and food supplies were sufficient. But with the stadium functioning like one vast, open-plan dormitory, there was almost no privacy. Personal belongings and relief



Volunteers show Typhoon Haiyan survivors in Palo, Leyte Province, how to use Tzu Chi's folding bed during an aid distribution. The typhoon devastated the central Philippines in 2013.

DONNA NAKAR





台灣佛教慈濟基金會

TAIWAN BUDDHIST TZU CHI FOUNDATION



items were often crammed under the beds due to limited storage space.

After learning about these conditions, Master Cheng Yen instructed Siao to design privacy cubicles and storage containers. By the following year, the cubicle was ready. Each one, made from 280 recycled 600-milliliter PET bottles, unfolded to about six square meters (65 square feet)—enough for two folding beds plus a folding table and chair. Standing 165 centimeters (5'5") tall, the opaque walls of the cubicle blocked most lines of sight,

offering families a much-needed sense of privacy.

Once introduced, the cubicles were quickly adopted in disaster responses. After the April 3, 2024, earthquake in Hualien, for example, volunteers provided shelter residents with hot meals, blankets, and folding beds, while the cubicles gave families a private space to change clothes or infants' diapers, or quietly express their sadness. They addressed a key challenge of open-plan shelters.

The cubicles were designed and mass-produced quickly, but the storage containers took



far longer. Their final version was only released in early 2025, after six to seven years of design and testing.

“The containers had to function both as storage units and as pullable carriers—something not available elsewhere—so the process took time,” Siao explained. The idea for incorporating multiple functions in the design came from watching aid recipients carry relief goods home. Rice, oil, and other daily necessities can weigh over 20 kilograms, and many recipients are



Following the January 2025 earthquake in southern Taiwan, Tzu Chi provided privacy cubicles, folding beds, and blankets to set up a temporary shelter (above) in Nanxi District, Tainan City. Such cubicles are also used in other settings, like this free clinic event (left) in Campbell, California, USA.

ABOVE: WANG YONG-ZHOU; LEFT: JIANG GUO-AN

women or elderly people who must transport them long distances.

The solution was a set of stackable containers, each with wheels and an extendable handle, making them easy to pull. Once at home, the containers could be used as wardrobes, bookshelves, or cabinets. Beyond mobility, the containers also had to protect food. “The Master reminded us that in poor households, if food isn’t stored properly, rats may get to it, so storage also needs to provide protection,” Siao added.

With the completion of the storage containers, Siao’s vision of a One-Minute Indoor Shelter System was finally realized. Modeled on a double-room layout, the set included two folding beds, two mosquito nets, two supply kits, six storage containers, a folding table and chair, and a privacy cubicle. “And all the items are made from eco-friendly materials—that’s our guiding principle,” Siao emphasized.

Recognized on the international stage

To put environmental protection into practice, materials originally made from virgin sources



In 2024, Aston University in the U.K. hosted a forum on disaster resilience, bringing together experts from the U.K., Taiwan, and Japan. Marshall Siao is shown here sharing his design concepts for the privacy cubicle and other relief items.

WANG SU-ZHEN

have been replaced with recycled ones. Fabrics for privacy cubicles and mosquito nets are made from recycled PET bottles, while tables, chairs, beds, and storage containers incorporate recycled plastics from electronics factories, PP cups, and other sources. In this way, Siao's designs combine environmental sustainability with humanitarian aid, advancing a circular economy.

In April 2024, Tzu Chi participated in the Multi-Faith Leader Climate Resilience Roundtable at the headquarters of the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). At the event, the foundation also showcased its key disaster relief items, referred to as the "Seven Treasures of Disaster Relief"—the folding bed, table, chair, mosquito net, privacy cubicle, storage container, and blanket.

Many U.S. government officials and NGO representatives explored the cubicle display and even tested the folding beds for themselves. "It's very sturdy—I can feel it," one visitor remarked. Recognition from FEMA, as well as established aid organizations such as the Red Cross and the

Salvation Army, affirmed that Tzu Chi's innovations are effective in disaster response under diverse conditions.

Debra Boudreaux (曾慈慧), chief international affairs officer of the Tzu Chi Foundation, noted that FEMA is particularly impressed by Tzu Chi's eco-blanket and has officially recognized it as a relief item. The blanket has become a staple in Tzu Chi's disaster relief efforts in the U.S.

Aside from the blanket, the mosquito net and privacy cubicle have attracted the most attention from partner organizations. Boudreaux explained that over 20 American charities are already planning to acquire cubicles. Some will place them in churches to provide temporary shelter for those in need, while others will use them as nursing rooms or private counseling spaces. "The mosquito nets are valued because climate change has brought heavier rains, creating standing water that breeds mosquitoes and other pests," she said. "For these reasons, we emphasize these two items: cubicles for privacy, and mosquito nets for protection."

Looking at Tzu Chi's disaster relief innovations, Boudreaux observed that they have performed very well in terms of the foundation's ideals, sustainability, and creativity. The greatest "shortcoming," she added, is that there aren't enough of them.

She cited the blanket as an example: To meet United Nations emergency response standards, roughly forty 40-foot shipping containers of blankets should be kept in reserve. Compared with this benchmark, Tzu Chi's current stock has significant room to grow. She hopes that more blankets, beds, cubicles, and other items can be produced and stored to meet the needs of increasingly severe climate-related disasters.

Since the beginning, Tzu Chi's disaster relief tools have been continually refined and expanded. Now that the One-Minute Indoor Shelter System is complete, Siao is already looking ahead to his next challenge: an outdoor shelter system for people with no roof over their heads, forced to endure the elements. "My hope is that we can build a house in just five minutes—to give people in need a place of refuge," he said with a sense of mission. ●●



Blankets for People and the Planet

By Yeh Tzu-hao

Abridged and translated by Wu Hsiao-ting

Tzu Chi has distributed nearly 1.4 million eco-blankets worldwide over the past 19 years. Every thread in these blankets has been recycled from discarded PET bottles, collected and sorted by volunteers. The transformation, from waste to something of real value, offers warmth to people in need.

“**M**others in the audience widened their eyes in disbelief that such warm blankets could be made from PET bottles!” recalled Tzu Chi volunteer Chen Shu-nu (陳淑女), describing her experience distributing aid to Ukrainian refugees in Poland. “More than just surprised, they were touched by Tzu Chi’s efforts to protect the Earth and create a better environment for future generations.”

Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Within a year, Tzu Chi had provided over 40,000 blankets and more than 38,000 gift and cash cards to over 80,000 displaced Ukrainians. The aid brought comfort and support to refugees adjusting to the harsh realities of exile.

Tzu Chi blankets have been given to those in need around the world, from Taiwan’s Typhoon Morakot in 2009 to more recent crises such as the Russia-Ukraine war and wildfires in the United States. More than 1.39 million such blankets have been distributed for disaster relief since mass production began in 2006.

No matter the situation, volunteers have consistently explained the origin of the blankets while distributing them. Recipients learn that the blankets provide not only physical relief but embody the love, kindness, and dedication of Tzu Chi volunteers. Bottles collected and sorted by volunteers in Taiwan undergo a low-carbon,

low-consumption, and low-pollution process as they are transformed into blankets. This exemplifies the principles of reusing and recycling within a circular economy. It’s due to many people’s care and hard work that ordinary waste products can be transformed into something extraordinary.

A smaller environmental footprint

Polyethylene terephthalate (PET), one of the most commonly used plastics for beverage bottles, is a stable polymer that can take hundreds of years to decompose. On average, each Tzu Chi eco-blanket can be produced from about 67 PET bottles, giving new life to plastic that might otherwise persist in landfills for centuries.

In addition to reducing plastic waste, the blankets’ production generates 15 percent fewer carbon emissions than similar products made from virgin materials. Water use and pollution are minimized through a pre-dyeing process. For example, producing a one-kilogram eco-blanket consumes only 643 liters of water—compared with 2,700 liters required to make a conventionally dyed short-sleeved cotton T-shirt.

Synthetic fibers are extruded from the processed PET plastic and spun into yarn. Tzu Chi’s signature blankets are light gray, woven from black and white yarn. The white yarn comes from transparent PET bottles, while the black yarn is

made by adding carbon powder to the plastic. This pre-dyeing method makes the production process more environmentally friendly and resource-efficient.

In 2011, Tzu Chi blankets passed a rigorous review by TÜV Rheinland Group—an international testing and certification organization based in Germany—earning a water footprint certification, the first of its kind in the global textile industry. Uwe Halstenbach, then general manager of TÜV Rheinland Taiwan, praised the achievement, noting that water footprint was a very new metric, with most applicants coming from the electronics industry. DA.AI Technology, which developed and produced the blankets, was considered a pioneer in the textile sector.

Cherishing limited resources

As early as the 1990s, the textile industry understood that recycled PET bottles could be shredded, melted into resin pellets, and processed into fibers, yarn, and fabric for a variety of products, including clothing, blankets, shoes, and more.

Alex Lo (羅忠祐), a Tzu Chi industrialist volunteer in the textile sector, highlighted the importance of reusing resources: “Mother Earth’s resources are limited and should be reused whenever possible.” He added that once PET bottles are melted down, the recycled material is nearly identical to new PET. Since PET, like most plastics, is derived from crude oil or natural gas, recycling it reduces reliance on fossil fuels.

Recognizing the great need for disaster relief supplies, Tzu Chi’s industrialist volunteers established the Tzu Chi International Humanitarian Aid Association (TIHAA) in 2003. In addition to developing various items, the association provided logistical help and information and communication technology support. Since blankets were often in high demand after disasters, Master Cheng Yen instructed that eco-friendly textiles be developed from recycled plastics. Following her guidance, Walter Huang (黃華德)—then chairman of the Taiwan Garment Industry Association and head of TIHAA—rallied fellow industrialist volunteers to begin research and development (R&D) on how PET bottles collected by Tzu Chi recycling volunteers could be turned into textiles.

By that time, Taiwan’s PET bottle recycling rate had already surpassed 90 percent, but most of the recycled output was short fibers, suitable only as stuffing for plush toys. If long fibers could be produced instead and woven into textiles, it would be a technical breakthrough and a realization of Master Cheng Yen’s ideal of achieving both environmental and humanitarian goals: “Turn garbage into gold, and gold into love.”

The first trial production was in 2004, but the success rate was only 30 percent. The industrialist volunteers later discovered that the problem lay in the raw materials: Though the bottles themselves were made of PET, the caps and rings were made of other plastics. When mixed in, these impurities caused fibers to break during extrusion.

This has since been resolved through water-based separation: Shredded plastic from bottles is placed in a water tank; the PET flakes sink while cap and ring flakes float, allowing the plastics to be separated. But more than 20 years ago, this technology was not yet mature. Volunteers instead overcame the challenge by hand, painstakingly removing caps and rings one by one. Tens of thousands of volunteers devoted time and care to sorting the materials, ultimately raising the yield of workable recycled yarn to nearly 90 percent. By 2006, mass production began.

In 2008, five industrialist volunteers, including Walter Huang, founded the social enterprise DA.AI Technology Co., Ltd. The company not only took over the production and R&D of eco-blankets and other disaster relief items but also began developing a range of clothing and lifestyle goods from recycled plastics—bringing circular economy principles into daily life. The following year, all company shares were donated to Tzu Chi, with net profits dedicated to charitable work.

Since its founding, DA.AI Technology has collaborated with experts from industry, academia, and research sectors to develop more than a thousand products, repeatedly earning international certifications and awards. Yet co-founder and general manager James Lee (李鼎銘), who serves as a volunteer, rarely talks about the company’s technological achievements. Instead, he points to the quiet dedication of the recycling volunteers.

He recalled, “I once asked an elderly volunteer



Tzu Chi's eco-blankets have reached 47 countries and regions. In Poland, they provided warmth to Ukrainians displaced by the war (above). After the February 6, 2018, earthquake in Hualien, Taiwan, Jing Si Abode monastics and Tzu Chi volunteers delivered hot meals and eco-blankets to victims of a partially collapsed hotel (right).

ABOVE: ALBERTO BUZZOLA; RIGHT: QIU JI-QING

at a recycling station, 'You could stay home with the air conditioning on and watch TV—why come here, where physical comforts are minimal?' She simply said, 'Because I love the Earth!'" He added, deeply moved, "When they say they love the Earth, they are really loving their children and grandchildren—the generations to come."

Of the over 90,000 recycling volunteers across Taiwan, many are seniors, and some face illness or physical limitations. Yet they persist in their recycling work, even pledging to continue until



their last breath. They are truly the heroes behind Tzu Chi's environmental mission.

Consume thoughtfully

In addition to producing the widely distributed eco-blankets, DA.AI Technology has developed products to meet the diverse needs of Tzu



Chi volunteers engaged in disaster relief, charity, and medical work. The puncture-resistant insole, designed to fit a variety of shoes, was created and refined at Master Cheng Yen's suggestion after she noticed that volunteers entering disaster zones might step on sharp objects. After the August 23, 2018, tropical depression floods, for instance, volunteers cleaning affected homes along Taiwan's Chiayi and Tainan coasts relied on these insoles to help prevent injury. Another product is the solar-powered LED cap. Equipped with a built-in light, an ordinary baseball cap later proved useful as a portable light for Tzu Chi doctors during free clinic events outside of Taiwan.

Beyond keeping volunteers safe and supporting their work, DA.AI Technology has also tackled major environmental issues, such as microplastic pollution. Concerned about microfibers—tiny plastic threads that come from synthetic fabrics, most often shed during washing—and their impact on marine ecosystems and human health, the company collaborated with the Industrial Technology Research Institute to develop a new type of functional fiber. This innovation reduces the release of microplastics during washing by half, further advancing the principles of environmental stewardship.

The coasts of Taiwan's Penghu Islands receive garbage from around the world year-round due to seasonal winds and ocean currents. Tzu Chi volunteers continue to collect and recycle it. Reducing plastic use and ensuring used plastics are recycled are vital for protecting the environment we all share.

HUANG XIAO-ZHE

Growing environmental awareness has deepened the public's understanding of sustainable development. People are more willing to support a circular economy through green consumption and to participate as recycling volunteers. However, from a broader perspective, recycling and remanufacturing cannot fully restore resources, as some loss or degradation is inevitable, and the process still consumes water, electricity, oil, and raw materials. For this reason, DA.AI Technology encourages consumers to avoid over-purchasing and to buy only what they truly need. In addition to choosing recycled and eco-friendly products, it is even more important to practice the principles of reduce and reuse in daily life. By valuing every resource, we can help ensure the sustainability of the Earth's resources. ☯

A Leg Up for Families in Bodh Gaya

By Li Mei-hui and Yuan Shu-zhen

Translated by Wu Hsiao-ting

Volunteers help needy families gain skills and start small businesses so they can earn a steady living.



Advanced sewing students at the Tzu Chi office in Bodh Gaya work on school uniforms. Five students completed their uniforms in March and were recognized with monetary awards from Tzu Chi. HU YUAN-ZHEN

Morning had just begun at the Buddha Juice cart in Bakraur, Bodh Gaya, India, and six glasses of fresh orange juice had already been ordered. Lalmani Devi greeted customers as her son, Omanand Kumar, swiftly peeled oranges and her daughter, Nandane Kumari, washed glasses. For this family, the cart represents both hope and a new beginning.

Seven years ago, Lalmani's husband, Bhimsen Prajapati, suffered a serious electric shock at work. He was in a coma for two weeks, and though he eventually recovered, his strength and memory were slow to return. Lalmani took up farming to keep the family afloat, but her modest income barely covered the costs of raising their three school-aged children.

In November 2023, Tzu Chi volunteers learned of the family's situation and visited them to offer support. When they discovered that Bhimsen hoped to become self-reliant by selling fresh juice outside a private hospital near their home, they provided him with a custom-built cart and a juicer. The cart was designed according to his ideas—sturdy, durable, and easy to move. Bhimsen had originally planned to name it after his daughter, but when he saw the finished cart in January 2024, he was deeply moved by Tzu Chi's generosity. "Tzu Chi is a Buddhist organization, so I decided to name the cart after the Buddha!" he said with emotion.

Since then, Bhimsen's health has improved enough for him to find new employment, leaving the cart for Lalmani to manage. She has sought ways to grow the business, such as selling ready-made cookies for extra income. Nandane, about to enter tenth grade, beamed as she said, "Before, Mom had to ride her bike to the fields and work in all kinds of weather. Now, this is so much better."

Sanjeet Paswan runs another thriving cart. He rises at five every morning and takes a tuk-tuk to a wholesale fruit and vegetable market in Gaya to buy pineapples and papayas. Around nine o'clock, he begins preparing the fruit, and from ten to noon, sells slices in front of the Mahabodhi Convention Center. In the afternoon, he moves his cart to Mahabodhi Temple and continues vending.

A small plate of fruit sells for ten rupees

(about US\$0.11). Sanjeet earns around 15,000 rupees (about US\$170) a month—enough to set aside money to build a small storage unit for his fruit. His daughter helps however she can, waking before four in the morning to prepare his breakfast. "Eating the breakfast my daughter makes for me makes me feel truly happy!" he exclaimed.

In May, both families joined Tzu Chi's Loving Store campaign, placing coin banks at their stalls for customers to donate spare change. Volunteers regularly collect the donations and use them to help others in need.

Once unemployed, Sanjeet can now support his family of seven. Dropping a donation into the coin bank at his cart, he smiled broadly and said, "I am very thankful—I'm a truly blessed person."

Vocational training

Tzu Chi officially registered as a non-governmental organization in Bodh Gaya in 2022. Its local office opened the following September, offering not only charitable assistance but also vocational training and employment guidance to help aid recipients and disadvantaged families build sustainable livelihoods.

In Bodh Gaya, relatively few women work outside the home. In rural areas, it is common to see women chatting together, scrubbing pots with sand, or picking lice from family members' hair. While some women have paying jobs, it is usually in manual labor. To help men and women alike gain employable skills, the Tzu Chi office offers classes in sewing, computer use, Chinese, and English. The sewing class is primarily for women. A knitting class has also been established in Silaunja, a village where Tzu Chi has built homes for impoverished residents.

Koshila Devi, who moved into a Tzu Chi-built home in Silaunja, went from not knowing how to use knitting needles to skillfully making woolen hats after attending the class. She gained a practical skill and earns an income from it—and relishes the sense of accomplishment that comes with it as well. Tzu Chi volunteers pay her and other villagers based on the quality and quantity of their hats. During the cold season, the hats are donated to schoolchildren.

Rekha Devi, the knitting class teacher, said joyfully, “Through my students’ hard work, I can see real progress. On the day Tzu Chi distributes the wages, all the students thank me.”

Malaysian volunteer Kua Liang Ming (郭糧鳴) encourages the women to attend classes consistently and learn wholeheartedly: “You don’t need to pay anything to be here. Tzu Chi volunteers save money to fund your classes. Once you’ve learned, you can even teach others and help them in turn.”

In mid-May, volunteers visited Bakraur to promote the fourth cycle of the beginner sewing class and register villagers. Malaysian volunteer Lim Geok Kim (林玉金) explained the simple rule they set to highlight the importance of committing to the class: “If you miss more than three classes, you cannot continue.” The young women who were present, initially eager to join, hesitated upon hearing the attendance requirement.

The first to enroll was 18-year-old Sweetie Kumari, who smiled brightly and showed great determination. Her father is one of Tzu Chi’s “tea instead of alcohol” success stories, having abstained from drinking for over seven months. He now sells sugarcane juice near Mahabodhi Temple.

A dream comes true

On May 20, Lim Geok Kim stopped by a shop near the Tzu Chi office. Stepping into the bright, spacious store, she was warmly greeted by the poised and confident Saraswati Devi. Saraswati was a graduate of Tzu Chi’s first sewing class. She had excelled during her 2023 training and could even help classmates resolve sewing machine thread jams.

While attending the class, she read a saying by Dharma Master Cheng Yen: “Learn by doing, awaken through learning, and act with awareness.” The aphorism resonated with her and gave her the confidence and insight to pursue her own dreams. Inspired, she made a wish: “One day, I’ll open my own shop.” That wish came true on October 10, 2024. Today, she runs a neatly organized store selling saris, traditional Indian women’s attire. A sewing machine in the store allows her to offer free alterations for customers.



Volunteers Lim Geok Kim (right) and Ling Cui-lian (凌翠蓮, left) pose with Saraswati Devi at her store. Saraswati graduated from Tzu Chi Bodh Gaya’s first sewing class.

LI MEI-HUI

“I started with no skills at all,” Saraswati said. “Thanks to the Tzu Chi teachers, I learned both knowledge and techniques. Now I can make clothes, bags, and school uniforms. I’ve discovered that I can do so much—and keep improving.”

She added that she had never thought about helping others before, but now that she knows she can, she is more than willing to give back. With the income from her shop, Saraswati and her husband, Racedeo, have been saving diligently. They plan to build a classroom on the land behind the store to teach sewing to other women, passing on her skills and contributing to the community.

Racedeo spoke about his wife’s transformation, noting that it extended beyond her sewing abilities: “She used to have a short temper, and we argued often. I didn’t know how to handle it. After joining the Tzu Chi sewing class, she gradually changed. Now she speaks gently, we discuss things calmly, and together we get things done better.” He added shyly, “I have a wonderful wife, and that makes me very happy!” ❀

Cataract Patients Receive the Gift of Sight

A Free Clinic Event by Tzu Chi Indonesia

Text and photos by Arimami Suryo Asmoro

Translated by Wu Hsiao-ting

When the bandages are lifted away at the follow-up visit, patients open their eyes to a renewed world.



In 2023, 41-year-old Slamet Budiono, a security guard and father of two, began experiencing an eye problem. What started as the sensation of a foreign object in his right eye gradually worsened until he could see only light and shadow. “The ground seemed level when I walked, but I kept tripping,” he recalled.

The vision loss, caused by a cataract, affected more than just his sight—it also put his livelihood at risk. “I worried my company might not renew my contract,” he said. “At my age, finding a new job is difficult. I wanted to get treated, but if I had to save the money myself, I didn’t know how long it would take to afford the surgery.”

His chance came through a Tzu Chi free clinic event. Yet even as he rejoiced at the good news, he couldn’t help but feel a tinge of anxiety—after all, this would be his first surgery. “I kept thinking, what if it fails? What if I end up completely blind in my right eye instead?” he said.

Fortunately, while waiting for the procedure alongside other patients, Slamet found comfort in their shared experiences. “We encouraged one another,” he said. “We started as strangers, but it soon felt like I had gained new family and friends.”

His fears proved unfounded. The day after surgery, when the bandages on his right eye were removed, he exclaimed, “I could only see light before, but now I can see people! I’ll no longer fumble when inserting a key into a lock, and I can walk with more confidence!”

Watching patient after patient regain their sight, ophthalmologist Tri Agus Haryono said, “Helping those who cannot see to see again is the greatest joy in my medical practice.”

From July 19 to 20, Tzu Chi collaborated with the 5th Military Regional Command/Brawijaya to hold a free ophthalmology clinic at Brawijaya Level III Hospital in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia. Patients came from Surabaya, Sidoarjo, Gresik, and Bangkalan. This marked Tzu Chi Indonesia’s 149th large-scale free clinic event, providing surgery for 142 cataract patients and 19 pterygium patients.

A medical professional tests Slamet Budiono’s post-operative vision, asking, “How many fingers can you see?”



Suparlan (right) undergoes pre-surgery screening ahead of the Tzu Chi clinic held on July 19–20 in Surabaya, Indonesia.

DOK

Sight restored, hope reborn

Before this free clinic, 47-year-old Suparlan, a former construction worker, had been out of work for three years due to cataracts in both eyes. What troubled him most was being unable to provide for his ex-wife and children. Everyday life had become full of obstacles—he often bumped into things, sometimes injuring his nose. “Once, I was riding a motorbike with my mother and nearly crashed into a railing,” he recalled. “I stopped riding motorbikes after that and switched to a bicycle, but I still ran into things. In the end, I decided it was safer just to walk.”

Eager to regain his sight, he registered for two free clinic events but was turned away both times because of household registration issues. On July 12 this year, his sister Kaselin accompanied him to the pre-surgery screening for the Tzu Chi free clinic. Seeing many others fail to pass the examination made them anxious, but they were deeply impressed by the volunteers’ care. “We’re so grateful to Tzu Chi,” they said. “We waited from



Slamet Budiono (center) and other patients hold hands and encourage one another before their surgeries.

morning until evening, but were never hungry or thirsty. The volunteers were so kind, constantly checking to see if everyone had eaten.”

When Suparlan’s name was called and he received the yellow card confirming he had passed the screening, Kaselin was nearly in tears. “My brother can finally have surgery!” she said. “Our whole family’s hope rests here. We really want him to recover and be able to work again so he can take care of his family.”

Suparlan’s vision was still blurry and his steps unsteady after his surgery on July 19, but his joy was unmistakable. “The volunteers and doctors were so dedicated,” he remarked. “They helped not only me but so many other patients. I’m truly grateful.”

The real surprise came at the post-operative

check the next day. When a nurse gently removed the bandages from his right eye and cleaned the area, Suparlan slowly opened his eyes to a clear, bright world. “It’s so bright!” he said with joy. “Even though I still haven’t found the glasses I wore to the event, I hardly need them anymore. I can see!”

A single surgery, a new life

Sixty-three-year-old Reti said that the cataract in her left eye had plunged her world into darkness, with lights appearing like scattered bursts of fireworks. As a massage therapist, she could no longer recognize the clients who came to her. Achmad Hafit, a 46-year-old truck driver, also suffered from a cataract in his left eye and had to drive relying only on his right. Making left turns terrified him, and the blare of horns from behind often sent his heart racing.

For both, clear vision meant the ability to earn a living. That is what makes a free clinic event like Tzu Chi’s so valuable—it allows people like

Reti and Achmad to continue supporting themselves and their families. Major General Rudy Saladin, commander of the 5th Military Regional Command, pointed out that cataracts are far from a minor ailment; they greatly affect a person's quality of life, capacity to work, and social interactions. "Eye surgery can directly improve recipients' lives by restoring their freedom of movement and independence," he added. "We are deeply grateful to our partner, Tzu Chi."

Fan Xiao-hui (范晓慧), head of Tzu Chi Surabaya, shared that this was their second collaboration with the Brawijaya Regional Military Command. "We're thankful to the military hospital for opening its entire building to us, including the operating rooms," she said. Seeing so

many people come for the free clinic filled her with mixed emotions. "I'm glad Tzu Chi can help so many regain their sight," she noted, "but it also weighs on my heart—there are still countless cataract patients across East Java waiting for help. I hope the Tzu Chi team in Surabaya can continue to grow stronger so we can hold even more free clinics."

Seven volunteers from Jakarta flew to Surabaya to work alongside the local Tzu Chi International Medical Association team. Chen You-lin (陳柚霖), coordinator of the event, said, "I thank everyone for their hard work and willingness to lend a hand and share their knowledge. Seeing the patients' surgeries succeed truly moved me."



Tzu Chi Free Clinic Events in Indonesia

- 1995: Tzu Chi volunteers begin partnering with the Tangerang health office to provide medication and nutritious food to tuberculosis patients. (This program continued until 1999.)
- 1999: Tzu Chi Indonesia holds the first large-scale free clinic.
- 2002: The Indonesian chapter of the Tzu Chi International Medical Association is established and begins offering regular free clinic events and medical relief after disasters.
- 2025: More than **290,000** patient visits have been recorded through free clinics of all sizes.



○ National Capital
● Areas Served by the 149th Free Clinic

149th Free Clinic Event

Date | July 19–20, 2025

Location | Brawijaya Level III Hospital,
Surabaya

Beneficiaries | **161** people

- Patients came from four regions in East Java, most of them outdoor laborers exposed to strong sunlight and windblown dust, which contribute to high rates of cataracts and pterygium.

Eye Health in Indonesia

- Approximately 3.6 million people are blind, with cataracts accounting for about 70 percent. Of those affected, 43 percent cannot afford surgery, and 25 percent are unaware that treatment is even possible. Many avoid care due to fear or lack of someone to accompany them.
- Ophthalmology services are concentrated in urban areas, making access difficult for rural residents.

SOURCE: THE FRED HOLLOWES FOUNDATION WEBSITE



A scene in Guangfu Township,
Hualien, on September 28, 2025.
CHEN LI SHAO-MIN



A Flood of Mud, a Surge of Love

After a Barrier Lake Overflowed in Taiwan

By Chiu Chuan Peinn Compiled and translated by Wu Hsiao-ting

Floodwaters swept into Guangfu Township in Hualien when a barrier lake overflowed. This rare disaster in Taiwan's history devastated the town, but also sparked one of the largest spontaneous civilian relief efforts the island had ever seen.





Before and After the Cleanup

An empty alley with only a few shafts of sunlight on a quiet afternoon at Guangfu First Market, October 9 (above). Just two weeks earlier, mudflows had surged in from all directions, covering the market in a thick layer of sludge. Disaster relief workers and heavy machinery (left) work to clear the mud and debris in the aftermath. HSIAO YIU-HWA



Superheroes Rise to Clear a Path to Recovery

Taiwan Railway recorded nearly half a million passenger movements at Guangfu Station from the day after the disaster through the Double Ten Day long weekend, September 24 to October 12. That figure included both military personnel and civilians from across Taiwan who came of their own accord to join the relief efforts, with daily peaks exceeding 50,000. Helpers, equipped with their cleaning tools and affectionately called “Shovel Superheroes,” filled the trains. Even those who couldn’t get a seat didn’t mind standing—everyone was determined to go. In those days, all were Hualien residents at heart.

XU YONG-FENG

On September 23, 2025, heavy rain from Typhoon Ragasa caused a barrier lake upstream of Matai'an Creek in Hualien, eastern Taiwan, to overflow. Muddy water surged downstream, blanketing villages and communities in Guangfu Township with a thick layer of gray silt, leaving a formidable cleanup challenge in its wake.

The very next day, the Tzu Chi Foundation issued an online appeal to its volunteers and the public to help restore the affected communities. On September 25, I departed from Hualien Station on an early local train packed with Tzu Chi volunteers and other citizens heading to Guangfu to lend a hand. I was going as a reporter for *Tzu Chi Monthly*.

The platform at the small Guangfu Station was crowded after we had arrived and disembarked. The sudden influx of people made it clear that something extraordinary was happening in this ordinary town. As I stepped out of the station, I saw dust rising in the distance, bringing to mind old black-and-white footage of unpaved roads veiled in swirling clouds of haze.

Guangfu Station faces a long street that links the three villages of Da'an, Dahua, and Datong. Directly outside the station lay an open lot, its

painted parking lines buried under layers of dirt. On that very day, Tzu Chi established a command post at the station, which also became the site of Tzu Chi's mobile kitchen. Tzu Chi coordinated with the government's disaster response center and took responsibility for the area nearest the station during the initial phase of cleanup.

From September 25 onward, waves of people began arriving each day, starting as early as 8 a.m., with the number growing larger day by day. The parking lot served as an assembly point and staging area where helpers were divided into teams and assigned cleanup zones.

It wasn't long before the term "Shovel Superheroes" began appearing frequently in the media. Unlike the caped heroes of movies, these volunteers wielded shovels instead of superpowers, ready to clear mud and debris. Their willingness to step forward in a difficult time revealed the goodness of Taiwanese society, inspiring even more people to join the relief efforts.

Countless homes were in urgent need of cleanup. Clearing thick silt from inside houses was highly labor-intensive, demanding massive manpower and long hours. A dozen or more people could spend a full day on a single home and still have to return the next morning to finish the job.

Tzu Chi Relief Efforts

(AS OF OCTOBER 21, 2025)



Food and beverages provided:
40,441 servings



Blankets, folding beds, and privacy cubicles provided:
1,448 items



Homes cleaned:
1,121 households



Free medical services provided:
4,600 visits



Gift packs distributed:
3,106



Recycled computers distributed:
106 units



Mobile kitchen meals served:
47,960



Medical and health kits distributed:
1,202



Financial aid distributed:
2,670 households



Cleanup volunteer shifts:
21,337



Total volunteer shifts:
26,113



Guangfu Station serves as a hub for cleanup volunteers, with government and relief organizations setting up stations on-site. This photo was taken during the first post-disaster weekend, which coincided with the Teachers' Day holiday.

CHEN LI SHAO-MIN



During the first two days of cleanup, I often saw volunteers step outside for a break around 2 or 3 p.m. Having started work at eight or nine in the morning, they were simply running out of energy. The combination of high temperatures, exhaustion, and the risk of dehydration made heat stress and injuries a constant threat.

These volunteers spent entire days shoveling and moving mud, exposed to dust, returning home sore and exhausted. While they were

uplifted by the gratitude of flood victims, health and safety risks remained. Despite earning the moniker of “superheroes,” they were, ultimately, only human. Thankfully, various organizations were on-site distributing much-needed bottled water and sports drinks, and Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital set up an additional medical station on Zhongzheng Road, one of Guangfu Township’s main thoroughfares, to help care for both volunteers and residents.



Battling the mud

"Twist your leg! You have to twist it!" Amid the shouts of health center staff and Tzu Chi volunteers, I twisted again and again until I finally freed my leg from the mud. I briefly lost my balance and put one hand on the ground to steady myself—only to find it coated in a gray glove of sludge.

I had arrived at the Guangfu Public Health Center, intending to enter through the front



Volunteers use shovels, buckets, and wheelbarrows to remove sludge from inside the building (above). Under the scorching sun, another group of volunteers quickens their pace, knowing that the cleanup will become even harder once the mud dries (left).

ABOVE: JIAN MING-AN; LEFT: HSIAO YIU-HWA

path, but accidentally stepped into a patch of mud more than ten centimeters (four inches) deep. The wet, sticky sludge clung stubbornly to my rubber boots. Later, when I turned on the faucet to wash my hands, I discovered that the health center's running water had been knocked out by the flood. The staff and volunteers worked tirelessly under these harsh conditions, using squeegees and mops to repeatedly push the muddy water out of the building. It was a difficult task, as the murky water flowed uncontrollably in all directions.

The Tzu Chi team on-site came from the Jing Si Abode Maintenance Crew. All of its members had professional backgrounds in plumbing, electrical work, or masonry. They also had extensive disaster relief experience. Just this past August, they had completed roof repairs for households affected by Typhoon Danas in Tainan, southern Taiwan.

"I'm worried the water will drain away," said Lin Shi-jie (林世傑), a volunteer with masonry expertise. "The silt is full of water. The more you step on it, the more the water rises to the surface and

runs away, and the more compacted the soil becomes underneath, [making it harder to remove].” He compared it to cement used in construction—if left sitting too long, the sediment hardens.

His words reminded me of what I had observed at many cleanup sites: The deeper volunteers worked into a house, the more they noticed the mud beneath their feet beginning to harden, making the remaining sludge increasingly difficult to remove.

The mud was about 20 centimeters deep inside the health center. In the X-ray room, which sat slightly lower than the rest of the first floor, it reached 30 centimeters deep. Everyone first used buckets and wheelbarrows to haul the mud outside. As the level of mud dropped and water began seeping up from the sediment, they quickly switched to squeegees and cement scrapers to push it out. Those without tools improvised, using waterproof advertising posters to move the sludge.

Lin Shi-jie stressed that using the wrong technique to clean would quickly exhaust a helper. He mentioned that at 58, he was the youngest member of the Abode team present; the others were all over 65.

Only later did I learn that the thick, sticky mud that had trapped me at the entrance was the very sludge the staff and volunteers had cleared from inside the health center.

A kaleidoscope of helpers

The scenes I witnessed in Guangfu were strikingly different from what I saw in Tainan’s disaster zones in July and August after Typhoon Danas. In Tainan, most workers on-site were professional repair crews and utility teams. In Guangfu, helpers came from every walk of life: Tzu Chi volunteers in their signature blue-and-white uniforms, soldiers in camouflage, conscripts in fluorescent vests, disinfection workers in white coveralls, and, most numerous of all, warm-hearted citizens in everyday clothes.

These helpers often formed mixed teams on the streets or inside homes to clear the sludge. On one occasion, I saw three young conscripts in their 20s shoveling thick, muddy water into buckets, which a chain of older female Tzu Chi volun-

teers then passed outside. After nearly three hours of work, some remarked that the mud seemed to have grown heavier. Different ages and genders working together required patience and a willingness to adapt to each other’s strengths and limitations.

One’s ability, of course, isn’t always tied to age, gender, or size. Monastics from the Jing Si Abode joined the cleanup around the Teachers’ Day long weekend, September 27–29. On September 26, a beauty and skincare shop owner and her older brother were cleaning their store when they noticed a nun, well into her 60s, working alongside them. The shop owner whispered to her brother, “She’s so petite—can she really manage the work?”

“Don’t be fooled by our size,” the nun replied with a smile. “You can count on us to work like men!”

The shop owner beamed as she spoke of the moment: “Yesterday it was just my brother and me cleaning, and I was feeling really down. But today, seeing the Tzu Chi brothers and sisters here, I felt calm and uplifted.”

Cleaning the affected communities required not only human strength but also heavy machinery. In the days following the disaster, the streets were lined with piles of silt and mud-matted furniture. Bulldozers, excavators, and other machines wove ceaselessly through the debris—some small enough to enter homes, others large enough to pile sand and gravel three stories high.

Caught in one of the traffic jams, I spoke with a dump truck driver whose vehicle was filled with sludge.

“I’m heading to the collapsed bridge,” he said.

“The one over Matai’an Creek between Guangfu and Wanrong?” I asked.

“That’s right.”

“How many trips have you made?”

He shook his head. “I’ve lost count—too many to remember.”

The scale of the disaster was immense. Military vehicles, water trucks, and heavy equipment from counties and cities across Taiwan were a common sight. In early October, in Dama Village, I met a bulldozer operator loading a five-meter-high pile of sand and gravel onto a truck.



“Shovel Superheroes” have their boots cleaned to prevent mud from being brought into a carriage before heading home by train after helping clean up the disaster area.

SHEN XIU-HUA

A volunteer comforts a flood-affected resident.

LIU QIU-LING

He had come all the way from Taoyuan in northern Taiwan and had been working in Hualien for two weeks.

One mission, many fronts

From government agencies to civic groups, all sectors joined in the relief work. Tzu Chi was among the first to respond.

Yen Po-wen (顏博文), CEO of Tzu Chi’s charity mission, arrived with his team in Guangfu Township amidst wind and rain on September 24 for an on-site assessment. They immediately mobilized volunteers for cleanup, launched a nationwide youth volunteer recruitment cam-





In the 17 days after the disaster, volunteers prepared over 47,000 servings of savory porridge, noodle soup, and other meals at Tzu Chi's mobile kitchen.

WANG JIA-BIN

paign, and arranged for the delivery of cleaning equipment and relief supplies. At the same time, they attended government coordination meetings to assist in the broader disaster response.

On September 25, nearly 300 Tzu Chi volunteers from Hualien and Taitung were urgently mobilized to help in the disaster area. Yet by the end of the day, they had managed to clear only 15 homes. With an estimated 2,000 households affected, Yen admitted to feeling disheartened. However, as media coverage of the devastation spread, the Teachers' Day long weekend brought a surge of helpers from across Taiwan—especially young people averaging around 30 years old. They were energetic, disciplined, and cooperative, leaving Yen impressed and deeply moved.

The overwhelming turnout over those three days greatly accelerated the cleanup. In the days that followed, helpers continued arriving in Hualien to lend a hand. Yen lauded this as “a milestone moment demonstrating the strength of Taiwan's volunteer spirit.”

Aside from helping with the cleanup, Tzu Chi provided assistance in several other areas. Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital set up a temporary medical station at the Guangfu Sugar Factory the

day after the disaster, later expanding to two additional stations in harder-hit areas. Within just the first five days, medical teams treated 500 trauma cases, including wound cleaning and suturing. One of the medical stations was established on property generously offered by Xu Heng-rui (許恒瑞), who said, “It's nothing at all. I'm just grateful to Tzu Chi and everyone else who came to help Guangfu.”

On the first day of cleanup, September 25, Tzu Chi's emergency aid team transported a mobile kitchen to the open area in front of Guangfu Station. Hot meal service began on September 26. “Local residents told us they were deeply touched when we started cooking that first day—they'd been eating bread for three days and could finally enjoy a hot meal again,” said Tzu Chi volunteer Xu Bi-zhu (許碧珠), who had traveled from New Taipei City to help. Meals were also prepared at Tzu Chi's Ruisui Jing Si Hall, about a 20-minute drive from Guangfu, to help meet the high demand for food.

Volunteers, working alongside the foundation's social workers, also prepared and organized the distribution of financial aid, which began in early October across Da'an, Datong, Dahua, Dama, and the Ataomo tribal community in Dongfu. “Finding suitable distribution sites at this stage was very challenging,” said senior volunteer Huang Li-yun (黃麗雲), explaining that each venue needed to be convenient for residents and spacious enough for waiting areas, registration desks, care stations, and supply zones, ensuring a smooth and comfortable process. Despite the challenges, over 2,000 households benefited from the distributions, each receiving 50,000 NT dollars (US\$1,700).

On October 7, the day after the Mid-Autumn Festival holiday, members of the Jing Si Abode Maintenance Crew began repair work in the disaster area, prioritizing affected Tzu Chi volunteers, disadvantaged families, and households under the foundation's long-term care. On October 9, team members arrived in Dama Village to help restore a Tzu Chi University student's home. Floodwaters had destroyed the window frames and glass, and all furniture and appliances had been cleared out, leaving the house nearly bare.



“Our first priority is to restore what’s essential for daily life, such as water and electricity,” said team leader Chen Chong-guang (陳重光). The home’s plumbing was clogged with silt—showers, faucets, and toilets all needed to be cleared or reconnected before they could be used again. Volunteer Chen Jin-zhong (陳進中) repeatedly checked the bathroom, kitchen, and outdoor septic tank to determine the next steps. Other volunteers later delivered Tzu Chi folding beds and privacy cubicles, helping the family rest with dignity.

After the disaster, Tzu Chi volunteers from different regions and teams applied their expertise wherever needed, helping residents gradually regain the rhythm of daily life amid the chaos.

Path to recovery eased

With so many volunteers working in the disaster zone—both from Tzu Chi and otherwise—the foundation developed a digital mapping platform to track progress and needs. The

A healthcare professional treats a patient at a Tzu Chi medical station.

CHEN LI SHAO-MIN

system showed which homes had been cleaned, which still required cleaning, and which needed heavy machinery, helping to avoid duplicated efforts. It also marked the locations of medical stations and supply points, allowing people to access assistance more efficiently.

Thanks to the dedicated work of helpers from across Taiwan, supported by military personnel operating heavy machinery day and night, Guangfu’s road to recovery became much smoother. Amid the mud and debris, acts of kindness converged into a collective effort, restoring homes and streets while also lifting the town’s spirit.

The outpouring of love and solidarity turned Guangfu into a moving testament to how, when one place is in distress, compassion from every direction can come together to heal it. ☸



Tzu Chi's Dongda Assistive Device Outlet

Supporting Families With Assistive Equipment

By Zhang Li-yun Translated by Wu Hsiao-ting Photos by Hsiao Yiu-hwa



Tzu Chi has more than 130 assistive device outlets in Taiwan. The one at the Dongda Campus in Taichung began in 2023 with just a few women but has since grown to over 150 volunteers, delivering nearly 500 devices each month to families needing such equipment. How did they manage such a feat so quickly?

It wasn't yet nine on a Saturday morning, but several people were already waiting outside the assistive device outlet at Tzu Chi's Dongda Campus in Taichung, central Taiwan. Moments later, volunteer Li Guan-hui (李冠慧) arrived in a hurry, her arms loaded with bags. "Sorry I'm late! But we don't open until nine!" she called out with a smile.

The outlet's office, about a hundred square meters (1,080 ft²), serves as a hub where people can apply for or return assistive devices. It resembles a medical supply store inside, with second-hand wheelchairs, walkers, suction machines, bedside rails, commode chairs, and other home-care equipment neatly organized and labeled for easy access. Each item has been thoroughly cleaned, disinfected, and repaired if necessary. Donations from companies—such as diapers, underpads, and nutritional supplements—are also available free of charge to families in need.

That morning, Mrs. Lin and her son arrived to return a wheelchair they had borrowed a year earlier. They hoped to exchange it for a sturdier model for her husband, who has Parkinson's disease and had become much heavier over the past year—now weighing 96 kilograms (210 pounds). Volunteer Huang Sha-li (黃沙麗) brought out a wheelchair, but Li Guan-hui thought the seat was still too narrow. She quickly headed downstairs to the storage area and returned with another model.

"This one is heavier but more stable," Li explained. "The backrest can be adjusted so he can recline and rest. Just be sure to set the wheelchair's speed lower to prevent tipping." Ever cautious and mindful, she also reminded Mrs. Lin to always engage the wheelchair's brakes before moving her husband into and out of the chair.

Mr. Lin had been diagnosed with Parkinson's six or seven years earlier. Because their son worked full time, Mrs. Lin had left her job to care for him. Later, the couple moved from Taipei to Daya, Taichung. A volunteer at the hospital where Mr. Lin received treatment told Mrs. Lin about the nearby Tzu Chi outlet, praising its wide selection of well-maintained equipment and suggesting she apply. That was how Mrs. Lin first learned of the service.

"I'm very grateful to Tzu Chi for filling the gaps in our household budget [by providing assistive devices free of charge]. They have really eased our burden," Mrs. Lin said. "I care for my husband entirely on my own. Thankfully, a Tzu Chi sister often comes by to chat and guide me in caring for him. Without her, I would have fallen into depression."

Just after Mrs. Lin and her son left, another woman arrived with two young people to apply for equipment. Nurse Su Wei-ling (蘇瑋苓), a member of the Tzu Chi International Medical Association, stepped forward to help. Such scenes are typical at the outlet, which serves many people each day. Two to three volunteers are on duty from Monday to Saturday. Nurse Su volunteers on Saturdays, her day off from work. She also shares her expertise on assistive devices with other volunteers, drawing on her nursing background.

Although the outlet runs very smoothly today, it started only two years ago. The story of how it came about is worth telling.

From small beginnings

In the summer of 2023, a woman visited the Dongda Campus seeking help. Her son had been paralyzed from the neck down in a car accident, and her family couldn't afford a specialized high-back wheelchair. Li Guan-hui happened to be giving a tour at the campus and met her. At the time, there was no assistive device outlet at Dongda, so no team was in place to take on the case.

As a Tzu Chi volunteer, Li was regularly visiting three Tzu Chi care recipients with spinal cord injuries, all of whom needed high-back wheelchairs and electric beds. She understood how important such devices were for these patients and how costly the equipment could be for ordinary families. Convinced that an outlet serving local residents couldn't wait, she volunteered to start one.

The idea of a local outlet immediately resonated with another volunteer, Zhang Xue-hui (張雪慧). While serving at the campus recycling station, Zhang had received several calls from people asking if secondhand assistive devices were available. Her personal experience gave her a

deep sense of empathy—her own son has severe cerebral palsy and has relied on such equipment for rehabilitation and mobility since childhood. The two women agreed: "Let's find like-minded people and do this together!"

The courage and resolve of the two women were admirable, but many—including veteran volunteer Cai Dong-wen (蔡東文)—were skeptical. Cai had often helped deliver discarded but still usable assistive devices from the campus recycling station to families in need. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, he fell seriously ill and had to discontinue that work. Now, with Li deciding to start an outlet, he worried she might give up halfway and leave the work to him. He shared the same concern with other doubters: Some devices, like hospital beds, weighed nearly a hundred kilograms and sometimes had to be carried upstairs during deliveries. How could a small team of three or four women manage such heavy work?

Even Li's husband, Li Chang-xian (李昌憲), had his doubts. "Assistive devices are usually very heavy—I didn't think she could manage it," he admitted. Busy with his job and volunteer commitments, he couldn't offer much help. "But on the other hand, I trusted her resilience." To his surprise, everything moved quickly: Planning began in September 2023, the outlet officially opened in mid-October, and just three days later, on the 18th, the first delivery was completed.

Yan Shi-chuan (嚴世川), who handles general affairs at the Dongda Campus, threw his full support behind Li. "I've got your back," he told her. "Just let me know if you need anything!" True to his word, he played a vital role in setting up the outlet—installing shelves, organizing areas for cleaning, repairs, and storage, and often completing tasks on the very day Li made a request. Under their plan, smaller items went on display in the office, while larger devices like electric beds, transfer machines, and rehabilitation equipment were stored downstairs.

Whenever applications came in for large items, volunteers used two trucks to deliver them on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons. Li Chang-xian pitched in whenever possible. Wednesdays were the toughest—sometimes four



or five families were scheduled for deliveries, and with most male volunteers at work, it was hard to find enough help. “I’d choose homes that were closer to my office, stop by to help move the equipment, then head straight back to work,” he recalled.

The couple still remembers their first Lunar New Year’s Eve after the outlet opened. While most families in Taiwan were home celebrating, they were out delivering hospital beds. “We felt that we had to complete all pending requests so that families could spend the holiday in peace,” they said.

But those days, though only a couple of years ago, seem far away. The team now has plenty of help. Whenever a delivery request is posted in the group chat, the slots are filled almost instantly—and nearly always by men.

The Dongda assistive device outlet is bright and spacious, with equipment neatly categorized and arranged.

LI GUAN-HUI

A valued resource

People who come to the Dongda Campus to apply for assistive devices include residents of Xitun District, where the campus is located, as well as several other areas in Taichung. Because the campus happens to be close to multiple hospitals and nursing facilities, in-home and institutional caregivers often recommend the outlet to families needing such equipment. Hospital case managers and doctors also inform patients about the resource.

Before a patient is discharged, doctors issue a pre-discharge preparation notice, advising fami-



lies to prepare the necessary assistive devices. Families can apply for equipment through public assistive device centers, but such centers sometimes experience shortages of high-demand items, such as electric beds. Government subsidies are available for certain devices, but renting a full set—including a hospital bed, wheelchair, walker, suction machine, and oxygen concentrator—can cost upwards of NT\$30,000 to 40,000 (US\$1,000 to \$1,330) per month, constituting a significant financial burden for many households.

As a result, many families turn to the Tzu Chi Eco-Friendly Assistive Device Program for help. With over 130 outlets across Taiwan, the program recycles, repairs, and provides equipment free of

Volunteers check recycled wheelchairs to ensure safety, replacing any parts that are worn or broken.

charge, ensuring quick access while easing financial pressure. Volunteers also deliver devices directly to households at no cost—a service especially meaningful for elderly individuals living alone without transportation. Many recipients are deeply moved when volunteers personally bring equipment and set it up for them.

Helping hands

The Dongda outlet team began with fewer than 20 volunteers, but by 2025, it had grown to over 150. How did this remarkable growth happen?

Manpower is essential for sustaining an outlet. When hands were short, solutions had to be found. Li Guan-hui often invited visitors—whether they came to apply for equipment or simply tour the campus—to look around the outlet, including the office and the downstairs area. She would explain the services they offered and the process of cleaning, disinfecting, and repairing devices. She used each of these encounters as an opportunity to recruit new volunteers.

One such visitor was Lin Qun-zhi (林群智). In 2024, newly retired from the general affairs office at a school, he stopped by the Dongda Campus while out walking with his grandson. After learning about the outlet, he decided to join the team.

Yu Zheng-de (于正德), a retiree from the aerospace industry, was inspired to help because his mother had benefited from the outlet. Its efficient service and well-maintained equipment had allowed her to transition smoothly from hospital to home care. After she passed away, he began assisting with equipment maintenance and deliveries.

Lin Jing-wei (林景偉), who had borrowed a wheelchair for his son following a car accident, was also moved to give back. Despite managing four or five chain stores, he sets aside Wednesday afternoons to drive and help with transport.

Xu Wen-xian (許文獻) signed on following the lead of his wife, Zhang Xue-hui. Because their son, as mentioned earlier, has severe cerebral palsy, Xu deeply understood the importance of assistive devices for both caregivers and patients. “Since I have the ability,” he said, “I feel I must help more people—after all, my own child has benefited from society.” On one delivery, he and other volunteers encountered an elderly woman caring for both her husband and son, who had suffered strokes. “We found them using a wooden bed covered with cardboard as a mattress,” he recalled. “I couldn’t believe such conditions still exist in Taiwan. They likely needed many things, but providing an urgently needed electric bed was the least we could do.”

Another volunteer, Lin Zhao-ji (林肇基), who works at a Ministry of Justice correctional facility, ran into former colleagues Lin Qun-zhi and Tu Ying-san (塗英三) during a visit to the outlet.

“There’s a magnetic quality here, a joyful energy,” he said. “The team works in harmony, like brothers.” Impressed, he joined as well.

On Saturday mornings, volunteers like these spend hours maintaining equipment. Before work begins, Lin Zhao-ji leads the team in stretching exercises. Around 1:30 p.m., they put on vests and helmets and set out to deliver devices. “I’m 62,” Lin said, “but at the outlet, I feel my spirit leap again. One of the sisters told me, ‘That’s the Tzu Chi soul.’ With this renewed energy, I believe I can continue volunteering with Tzu Chi for at least another 30 years.”

Behind the scenes

Running an outlet involves many responsibilities, so having many volunteers is a great help. In addition to frontline tasks like transporting equipment to families, volunteers handle extensive behind-the-scenes work.

The outlet, like other Tzu Chi assistive device centers, has a strict quality control process. “We tried several brands of cleaning solutions before finally settling on oxalic acid, which effectively removes water stains and rust,” Li Guan-hui explained as she scrubbed a piece of equipment. “If a device is not cleaned properly, it will be returned.”

In the storage area, charts detailing the cleaning, disinfection, and inspection procedures for wheelchairs, suction machines, air mattresses, electric beds, and other devices are posted for volunteers to follow. For instance, a wheelchair has 15 inspection points—besides checking the overall condition, volunteers make sure screw joints, bent areas, and even hidden spots are carefully cleaned, any chipped paint touched up, and screws, brakes, tires, and cushions repaired or replaced as needed. When mattress covers or the fabric parts of wheelchairs—such as seat and back covers—are torn or irreversibly stained, a team of skilled sewers at the campus is called on to help. They sew new replacements, ensuring the devices are both safe and visually appealing. Each item is signed off only after passing all checks.

“A wheelchair is not sent out even if missing just one small part,” Li explained. Some compo-



nents are small but expensive. In such cases, Li photographs the items and coordinates with other Tzu Chi outlets to obtain replacements. "Some devices are from different brands or production years, and the manufacturer no longer provides parts. In these situations, we wait for the same models to be recycled so we can combine two or three units into one functional device."

Maintenance extends beyond hardware. Every Saturday, the outlet hosts a workshop where nurses, rehabilitation therapists, and doctors share their expertise, helping volunteers build skills and confidence in serving clients. Li said, "We learn as we go, working together to build a strong reputation for our outlet."

Volunteers work together to maneuver a hospital bed up a narrow staircase for delivery to an applicant's room.

The power of united will

"Thankfully, along the way, there have always been kindhearted people stepping in to help—whether with manpower or resources," said Li. When the outlet needs tools for repairs or gloves and scrubbers for cleaning, someone appears like Santa Claus, leaving a large box of supplies at the door. Volunteers have even received gifts of fresh eggs, potatoes, fruit, and drinks from members of the public as tokens of appreciation.



Though still relatively new, the Dongda outlet now delivers nearly 500 items each month. Looking back on its establishment, Li shared a guiding belief: “Even when something seems hard to achieve, as long as you are determined, you can make it happen. As Master Cheng Yen often says, ‘Nothing is difficult if you set your mind to it,’ and ‘Proficiency comes from mindfulness.’”

She expressed deep gratitude for the team’s support, noting how every volunteer—regardless of age or the difficulty of a task—does what they can to ease the burdens of those in need. In turn, they enrich their own lives. For Li, every event in life arises from countless karmic affini-

Volunteer Chen Yue-hui (陳月慧), a critical care nurse, checks on a patient with a nasogastric tube while delivering assistive devices to the patient’s home. She also shares her nursing experience with families during such visits.

LI GUAN-HUI

ties, and every accomplishment depends on many such conditions converging. “That’s why we must cherish every encounter and every chance to help, so that we may live without regrets,” she said.

Summing up their journey, she concluded: “I truly believe that when we combine our willpower, we can unleash limitless potential.”





A New Ear, a New Chapter in Life

By Yu Jian-xing

Translated and edited by Wu Hsiao-ting and Steven Turner
Photos by Pan Xiao-tong

Ten-year-old Sok Reaksa from Cambodia spent six months at Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital in Taiwan, where she bravely underwent multiple surgeries to remove a tumor and reconstruct her right ear—fulfilling her grandmother's wish to see her with two ears.

Dr. Huang Chieh-chi (黃介琦) pushed open the heavy wooden door of the hospital room. The morning light flushed his cheeks, glinting off the silver frames of his glasses and catching the gray at his temples. He stepped into the room with practiced ease, careful not to let the heavy shopping bag in his left hand hit the doorframe.

As soon as she saw the doctor, Suy Ran rose from her cot and pressed her palms together. She greeted him with a slight bow and a “good morning” in Khmer. The fatigue in her eyes hinted at how often her nine-year-old granddaughter, Sok Reaksa, had woken in tears from post-surgical pain the night before.

Reaksa now lay curled on her hospital bed, wrapped tightly in a quilt, her left cheek resting against a stuffed rabbit. Thick gauze covered the right side of her head, hiding the ear that awaited reconstruction. The massive vascular tumor that had grown over her right ear and surrounding area was finally gone. Every time Dr. Huang saw the young girl’s smile despite the pain she had endured, he felt a renewed determination to do everything he could for her. This child still had a long life ahead.

He returned Suy Ran’s greeting and went straight to the refrigerator. Crouching down, he unpacked the shopping bag, placing the items inside: a large bottle of blueberry yogurt—he had switched from chocolate after Deputy Head Nurse Qiu Wei-lun (邱薇倫) warned that it could make children restless—fresh fruit, and cheese-cake, Ran’s favorite.

Since Reaksa began treatment at Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital in southern Taiwan a few months earlier, Dr. Huang’s Saturdays had taken on a new routine. Before, he usually kept things simple, preparing quick meals for himself. But now, Saturdays meant browsing supermarket aisles, comparing brands of dairy products and snacks, and thinking about how to help a growing child become stronger and taller. Once he had made the purchases, he’d stop by the hospital and restock Reaksa’s fridge with his selections.

After putting the items away, he prepared to leave. Ran thanked him as she walked him to the door, bowing her head with her palms pressed together.

It had been 25 years since Dr. Huang joined Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital. Decades had passed in the blink of an eye. Now a senior surgeon leading the Plastic Surgery Department, he reflected on the patients he had cared for, the demanding surgeries he had performed, and the colleagues who had worked alongside him. Amid decades of surgeries and patient care, Reaksa’s unexpected arrival from Cambodia felt like a test from heaven. Faced with a patient unlike any they had treated before, he and his fellow doctors kept asking themselves: What more could we do for this child?

Born with a big “ear”

Reaksa never seemed to mind the unusually large right “ear” she had been born with, but at times she would lower her head slightly, avoiding direct eye contact with strangers. Other children, however, were not so shy. They would point at the vascular tumor and ask questions—questions she could not answer. How could she explain a condition she did not understand?

Reaksa’s grandmother recalled the first time she saw her in the hospital, as a newborn in March 2016. Her sizable right ear was very conspicuous. “I told my son-in-law at the time, ‘Well, she’s already born, so be it,’” she said. Reaksa’s father later passed away, and her mother remarried. Raised by her grandmother, Reaksa always referred to her as “mom.”

“When Reaksa was two years old, she went to South Korea for treatment,” Ran shared, “but two months later she had to return because she was too young. Still, we held onto hope that one day someone would be willing to help.”

Reaksa lived with her grandmother in her aunt’s house. Every day, Ran would dig sweet potatoes in a nearby forested area to sell from house to house, or weave bamboo baskets, each selling for around 0.5 U.S. dollars—just enough to buy a cup of street-side coffee, two eggs, or half a kilogram of rice.

That “one day” finally came in 2024. In September, the chief of Reaksa’s village shared news of a free clinic being put on by the Samdech Techo Voluntary Youth Doctor Association (TYDA). Her grandmother brought her to the clinic, where it happened that the First Lady of



On September 15, 2024, the Samdech Techo Voluntary Youth Doctor Association discovered Sok Reaksa during a free clinic. Because her condition couldn't be treated in Cambodia, the association referred her to Tzu Chi. On September 27, the association's doctors accompanied Tzu Chi volunteers on a home visit to collect Reaksa's medical history, helping Taiwan's Tzu Chi medical team assess whether they could take over her treatment.



Dr. Huang Chieh-chi, director of the Plastic Surgery Department at Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital, removes the tumor from Reaksa. The surgery, which included a flap transplant carried out by other surgeons, took place on April 16. YU JIAN-XING

Cambodia, Pich Chanmony, who also was the vice-chairwoman of TYDA, saw Reaksa and learned of her story. The encounter gave Ran a glimmer of hope that her granddaughter's condition might finally receive attention and treatment. Because Reaksa's condition was complicated, her case was referred to Tzu Chi for further assistance.

On September 27, 2024, a group of visitors from TYDA arrived at her home in Siem Reap, about a half-hour drive from Angkor Wat. They were accompanied by volunteers from the Tzu Chi Foundation.

Facing the group of visitors, Ran's eyes reflected both concern and affection. "Reaksa is mischievous but very sensible," she said. "She never asks why she is like this. She even jokes about herself: 'With an ear like this, I can't wear an earring!'" Ran added wistfully, "I hope she can be like other girls and be pretty."

Where Reaksa's ear should have been was a mass of deep red, almost black, hemangioma tissue, extending from the temple at the side of her right cheek down to the level of her jaw and toward the back of her head. The tumor measured about 13 by 10 centimeters, larger than half her face. Each morning after she got up, she felt a heavy, pulling sensation from its weight.

Hsieh Ming-hsuan (謝明勳), head of Tzu Chi Cambodia, was among the visitors. He discussed Reaksa's case with Tzu Chi's headquarters in Taiwan. Within five days, Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital completed an initial evaluation and confirmed

that they could provide the necessary help.

The first Chinese word she learned

On December 15, Ran, carrying luggage for herself and Reaksa, took her granddaughter to Phnom Penh International Airport to fly to Taiwan for pre-treatment examinations. At the end of the week-long assessment, Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital staff brought Reaksa to an amusement park, where she rode the giant Ferris wheel and gazed out over the distant horizon.

"Everyone cares about me. I feel so happy. I feel loved," Reaksa said.

In February of this year, she returned to Taiwan for a more thorough examination and treatment. The plastic surgery and medical imaging teams at the hospital determined that her condition was a congenital hemangioma. Dr. Huang explained that hemangiomas are usually benign and relatively small, but Reaksa's had not shrunk with age; on the contrary, it had grown larger. Because the tumor might be receiving a large amount of blood, a rupture would be extremely difficult to manage.

The medical team carefully reviewed available literature on her condition. After three meetings led by Dr. Chen Jin-cherng (陳金城), deputy superintendent of Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital, they devised a three-stage treatment plan spanning six months: embolization, surgery, and reconstruction. The first step, embolization, would block most of the blood flow to the tumor, reducing the risk of excessive bleeding during surgery. Though the team remained cautious, they were confident that this approach gave Reaksa the best chance of success.

The embolization procedure was successful. "We blocked about 90 percent of the blood flow. The remaining vessels were too small to target," said Dr. Hsu Huan-ming (許桓銘) of the Department of Medical Imaging, who had spent five hours performing the procedure while wearing a heavy lead apron. Relieved by the outcome, he and anesthesiologist Dr. Chen Min-ling (陳旻鈴) waited for Reaksa to awaken.

The procedure, however, left Reaksa in considerable pain. The embolization itself caused significant pain, and pressure applied to her



The pain from tumor embolization and the tissue expanders in her thigh often reduced Reaksa to tears.

groin to stop bleeding added to her suffering. What's more, a lingering cold triggered frequent coughing. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she let out soft sobs. "You are incredibly brave!" Dr. Hsu said, carefully injecting pain medication, wiping sweat and tears from her face, and gently suctioning phlegm from her mouth.

The first Chinese word Reaksa learned in Taiwan was "pain." After the embolization, she often complained of headaches and pain all over her body. Pain medication provided only limited relief, posing a significant challenge for the pediatric and anesthesiology teams.

"Every day, at 3 or 4 a.m., and again around 2 p.m., Reaksa feels especially intense pain," her grandmother said. Lying beside her on her cot, she would rise at the slightest movement to comfort her granddaughter. Nearly 70 years old, she endured night after night of fitful sleep for the child she raised as her own.

During his rounds, Dr. Huang noticed the pained expression on Reaksa's face. He stepped out of the room, his eyes reddened as he empathized with her suffering. He also observed that the tumor had swollen rapidly after embolization, like an inflating balloon, with blood vessels visibly pulsing. Though temporary, the sight was alarming.

The goal of embolization was to deprive the tumor tissue of blood, causing it to die. But because Reaksa's hemangioma was congenital, it was entangled with many nerves and blood vessels, including those supplying her scalp. Cutting off blood flow to these areas caused pain that medication alone could not fully relieve.

Two weeks into her hospitalization, Reaksa gradually adapted to the less-intense but lingering discomfort from embolization. Dalin, a Tzu Chi volunteer from Cambodia assisting in her care, gently reminded her, "Your grandmother works so hard taking care of you. Don't call for her every time you feel a little pain." She encouraged her to be braver so it wouldn't be so hard on her grandmother.

One day, Dalin set up an overbed table so Reaksa could draw with colored pencils in her notebook. In about a minute, she completed a drawing: Two birds perched on a branch, their tails forming two hearts.

Above the birds, she wrote as she spoke aloud, "On the left is Grandma, and on the right is me. I want to take Grandma flying with me." Despite the pain and restless nights, Reaksa's spirit remained unbroken—she was already dreaming of caring for her grandmother in the future.

Through the pain

After the embolization, Reaksa underwent tissue expansion surgery, with two expanders implanted in her left thigh. This enabled her body to grow extra skin for a flap transplant following the removal of her hemangioma. The procedure brought new discomfort and frustration.

"When the pain is too much, I regret coming here and just want to go home," Reaksa admitted. Yet once the pain subsided, she quickly forgot her earlier complaints and responded positively to everyone's encouragement.

One morning, however, the pain became too much for her to bear. Her cries carried from her room all the way to the nurses' station, ten meters (33 feet) away. The day before, a nurse had applied tape to her thigh while tending to a tissue expander wound. Because her skin was so thin, the process of removing the tape had caused excruciating pain. "Do you want us to peel it off

slowly, or will you do it yourself?" asked Deputy Head Nurse Wei-lun. Shaking her head vigorously through her tears, Reaksa refused any help. She was adamant: She did not want anyone touching it again.

Through tears and a runny nose, Reaksa painstakingly peeled off the tape herself. When she was finally done, Wei-lun began disinfecting and changing the gauze. But it felt as if an invisible wall had gone up—Reaksa's angry gaze followed her every move.

"Hearing cries coming from the room at the end of the hallway in the middle of the night is heartbreaking," said Head Nurse Xu Yu-zhen (許玉珍). For a child Reaksa's age, the necrotic pain from the embolization combined with the stretching of her thigh skin from the expanders was so intense that even her grandmother could not console her.

From the very first day of embolization, the nursing team did everything possible to care for her. Beyond routine procedures, Reaksa was included whenever there were treats at the nurses' station or birthday cakes—she always received her share. "The first time I heard Reaksa say 'thank you,' her voice was so soft and gentle it truly warmed my heart," Yu-zhen recalled. Even with the language barrier, Reaksa could feel the care and kindness of those around her. Initially timid, she eventually began visiting the nurses' station on her own to draw and work in her exercise books.

A life-changing operation

Reaksa's most critical operation, the removal of her hemangioma, was scheduled for April. On the last Friday of March, everyone surprised her with a birthday party. She and Dr. Huang cut the cake together and joined hands to form a heart.

"Everyone says you're very brave," someone told her.

"I'm not brave," she replied.

"The surgery is coming up. Are you nervous?"

"No, I trust that Dr. Huang will take care of everything."

"Why do you trust him so much?"

"He buys me milk and fruit," she said simply.



A surprise birthday party was held for Reaksa on March 28. Here, she and Dr. Huang form a heart with their arms.

YU JIAN-XING

In July, as Reaksa's ear reconstruction continued, her pain eased and smiles became more frequent.

YU JIAN-XING

"He always thinks of me, so I trust him."

During one of the doctor's early morning rounds, while the nurses tended to Reaksa's wounds, he shone a small flashlight on the hemangioma. The upper portion had shriveled, its surface resembling parched, darkened land edged with a ring of pink. Even though February's embolization had blocked 90 percent of the vessels, blood flow remained substantial. To further reduce the risk of bleeding, he decided that a second embolization should be performed



before proceeding with surgery to remove the tumor. The procedure was successfully completed on April 9.

Though Dr. Huang had prepared himself mentally, it had been a long time since he had felt such tension. Some nights, sleep eluded him as he worried about massive bleeding and weighed



On August 10, after completing her treatment, Reaksa visited an amusement park with Dr. Huang and others, closing her extraordinary journey in Taiwan and beginning a new chapter in her life.

YU JIAN-XING

every possible approach. Again and again, he ran through the steps in his mind—how to remove the tumor and how to reconstruct the ear.

Having carefully prepared and strengthened his resolve to remove the tumor and stop the bleeding as quickly as possible, Dr. Huang was ready. On April 16, he entered the operating room with clarity of mind. With Dr. Zhuang Jun-qi (莊濬祈) assisting, he removed the tumor. By 10:30 a.m., the mass that had burdened Reaksa since birth was gone. The faith in her doctor that Reaksa had expressed at her birthday party had not been misplaced.

In what felt like an extra blessing, Dr. Huang discovered during the surgery that the girl's ear cartilage could be separated from the tumor and

preserved. Reaksa had her own ear all along; though smaller and misshapen, it was still hers. "What her mother gave her is better than anything I could create," Dr. Huang said. "This is truly a gift from heaven."

Frozen-section analysis soon confirmed the tumor was benign, and the surgery continued. Dr. Zhuang identified suitable blood vessels to connect with a skin graft, while across the table, Dr. Honda Hsu (許宏達) carefully harvested a flap of skin from where the tissue expanders had been placed in Reaksa's thigh.

As the skin graft transplant continued, Dr. Huang hurried to the crowded waiting room. With interpretation provided by volunteer Hsieh Ming-hsuan, who had come especially from Cambodia for the surgery, the physician informed Reaksa's grandmother that the operation had gone smoothly. Tears welled up in her eyes as she pressed her palms together in gratitude toward the doctor.

Six hours later, the flap transplant was com-

plete. Reaksa was transferred to the surgical intensive care unit for observation. Dr. Huang expressed gratitude for the collective effort behind her care. "It truly takes everyone working together—doctors, nurses, and volunteers," he said. "Without teamwork, we could not have given her our best."

No more sleepless nights

"I want to go home. If there's no plane, I'll swim back!" Reaksa declared. By then, she had been away from Cambodia for over a hundred days. Thoughts of recovery gave her strength, but periods of intense pain still left her exhausted and discouraged, wanting only to return home.

One day, pediatrician Dr. Liu Wei-li (劉瑋莉) brought her a cartoon-shaped balloon, hoping to cheer her, even briefly. Around the same time, Dr. Huang stopped by with a new flavor of milk. He had never tried it himself but had heard it could aid wound healing. After greeting Ran, he quietly placed it in the fridge.

This time, unlike the torment of embolization, Reaksa's recovery steadily improved as her wounds healed. Dr. Huang recalled how she used to burst into tears whenever he reached for her gauze. Now, when their eyes met, her gaze was warm.

He held close her grandmother's wish: "I want Reaksa to have two ears and look beautiful." Determined to give her as natural an appearance as possible, he returned to the operating room on May 7, May 28, and again in June for follow-up procedures, gradually shaping her right ear. By the end of these procedures, her right ear—once dominated by a massive hemangioma—now looked almost normal, so much so that his colleagues could not help but marvel.

Throughout it all, Reaksa never gave up. Her courage in enduring the seemingly endless treatments and pain finally allowed her grandmother to see her with two ears.

On July 9, Dr. Huang placed the final stitch. He carefully compared the lengths, sizes, and relative positions of both ears, scrutinizing every millimeter, knowing these details would affect her future appearance. Though this last procedure was relatively routine for a plastic surgeon,

he had nonetheless lain awake the night before, thinking about how to make her ear look even more natural. On this day, as always, he gave his best effort.

When it was done, he felt he could finally breathe a sigh of relief. Sleepless nights over Reaksa's treatment should now be behind him. Yet, as her departure approached, he felt a quiet sadness at the thought of parting.

Meeting Master Cheng Yen

During her ear reconstruction period, Reaksa attended a Tzu Chi kindergarten, wearing the uniform and socks thoughtfully provided by the teachers. Though older than her classmates and unable to speak their language, her time at the kindergarten made the long hospital days pass more easily.

On the afternoon of July 3, she went with Dr. Huang to Tzu Chi's Kaohsiung Jing Si Hall to meet Dharma Master Cheng Yen. In her hand was a piece of paper she had prepared in advance, with drawings of people and Khmer phonetics beside them.

"My name is Sok Reaksa," she said, standing straight and steady like a young tree. The hardships she had endured during treatment had made her stronger.

The Master asked gently, "How old are you?"

"I'm nine," Reaksa replied. The Master smiled and gave her a warm thumbs-up.

One by one, Reaksa pointed to the drawings on her paper and read aloud the words she had written. The Master observed as the figures—doctors and nurses—seemed to come alive on the page. Reaksa expressed her heartfelt thanks to the Master, the medical team, and Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital for their care. "I will do my best to grow strong and help others. Thank you all!" she said.

On July 30, she underwent her final surgery. On August 4, she was discharged. Through the selfless dedication of the medical team, the mindful support of Cambodian volunteers, and her own remarkable resilience, Reaksa was finally freed from the layers of gauze. After nine years of living with the tumor, her ear was finally reconstructed, marking the start of a new chapter in her life.



Stores That Gather Love in Malaysia

Text and photo by Yo Choon Yen

Translated by Wu Hsiao-ting

The Malay saying, “Little by little, over time, a hill is formed,” captures the essence of the Loving Store campaign, showing how tiny acts of kindness can grow into something remarkable.

In the northwestern Johor districts of Muar, Tangkak, and Segamat, Malaysia, a simple sign of kindness has become familiar: a sticker displaying the Chinese character for “love,” accompanied by a nearby coin bank quietly collecting small acts of generosity. Such signs appear in shops, at bustling market stalls, and in food courts. Through the Loving Store campaign, these participating shops have become Tzu Chi’s partners in contributing to the common good.

Bakery owner Wu Xin Yu (伍信羽) immediately joined the campaign when Tzu Chi volunteers brought a coin bank and sticker to her shop. She was deeply moved, she said, by seeing the volunteers visit stores and invite them to participate. “This is something I can do,” she explained. “My bakery may be small, but it can be a hub of love; starting with me, love is passed forward.” She knows that one person taking action can inspire many others to do the same, and that even a small act, like putting money into the coin bank, helps those in need and brings blessings to the world. “Doing good,” she emphasized, “shouldn’t be a spur-of-the-moment act, but should come from a steady, heartfelt belief.”

Liu Rui Yu (劉瑞裕) shares this same outlook. He runs a wonton noodle stall. Every day before opening for business, he drops three or five ringgit into his coin bank. “It’s no big deal, honestly,” he said with a smile. “I just help where I can, and do what I’m able to do. Asking me to donate 500 or 1,000 all at once—I can’t manage that. But put-

ting in a little bit every day? That I can do.” He also shares the idea with his customers, telling them, “This is an easy way to do good.”

Liu expressed his appreciation for the volunteers’ dedication in promoting the Loving Store campaign. “Seeing how hard you work makes us want to do our part too,” he said. “When everyone contributes a little, together it creates great strength.”

Building a community of blessings

The idea that small acts can lead to great good is not new here. As early as February 2016, when plans for the Tzu Chi Muar Jing Si Hall were underway, volunteers reached out to residents and business owners, inviting them to “adopt” coin banks and make small daily donations. Carrying forward that same spirit, volunteers officially launched the Loving Store campaign on May 16, 2023. Once again, they visited shops, this time delivering coin banks and the new “Love” stickers, encouraging customers to perform small acts of kindness by contributing their change.

Promoting the Loving Store campaign has required persistent effort. Over the past two years, volunteer Tan Su Lee (陳淑麗) and her fellow volunteers have walked countless streets and alleys in Muar. Progress was slow in the beginning. Many people were unfamiliar with the Loving Store concept, and the number of volunteers was limited. Nevertheless, they pressed on with determination, holding fast to Dharma



Master Cheng Yen's vision of serving and growing with the community.

With warmth and sincerity, volunteers continued their outreach one business at a time—from small corner shops and market stalls to chain stores and bank counters—inspiring more and more owners to join Tzu Chi in creating a better world. As of the end of June this year, over 1,200 stores across Muar, Segamat, and Tangkak had joined. Volunteers return three times a year to collect donations and share updates on Tzu Chi's work.

"We hope to see Loving Stores on every street and in every alley," Tan said, "helping kindness spread throughout the community and purify hearts while fostering harmony in society." The volunteers aim to reach 1,500 participating stores by the end of this year. "A streetscape filled with Loving Stores—that's the sight we truly want to see," she emphasized.

Looking up and seeing love

"Even giving just a small bit of help is a joy!" said Yao Jun Kai (姚俊凱), a fruit shop owner on

Vegetable vendor Lin Li Hui and a volunteer put up a "Love" sticker at her stall. Lin joined the Loving Store campaign in June when volunteers visited the market and invited vendors to participate.

TAN GUAT KIT

one of Muar's busy streets, greeting the Tzu Chi volunteers visiting his store with his ever-present smile. With a hint of humor, he added, "It's perfectly fine to place more coin banks here—anything that helps more people is great!" He continued, "You always come in a big group, and the atmosphere feels so lively and warm. Seeing how you give with such dedication is truly uplifting!"

Tea shop owner Li Shi Zhen (李仕珍) drops spare change into her bank each day, quietly wishing she could help more people. The "Love" sticker is displayed on both sides of her shop. "Every time I look up and see 'Love,' I'm reminded of Great Love [an unselfish love promoted by Tzu Chi]. It warms my heart," she said.

Vegetable vendor Lin Li Hui (林麗慧) was



A customer places a donation into a coin bank held out by Lin Li Hui.

busy weighing produce and giving change to a steady stream of customers when a group of volunteers stopped by. She greeted them with a bright smile and, when invited to join the Loving Store campaign, didn't hesitate to take a coin bank, make her donation, and invite the first customer to contribute as well. "We need to lead by example," she said. "When others see us give, they will follow." Affixing the "Love" sticker to her stall, she added, "It's like placing a little kindness in your heart. Helping others truly brings happiness!" Though she usually speaks little amid the market bustle, her actions leave footprints of goodwill.

"We aren't wealthy people, and that's precisely why we understand the importance of helping others," said Mohd Fakrey Bin Mohamad Ezad, a Malay vendor. He placed a coin bank in his stall and affixed a "Love" sticker to it. "When people see the sticker and the bank, they'll drop in a little change. If it can help anyone, that's a good thing."

He firmly believes that love transcends ethnicity and that everyone can do good. "Chinese, Malay, Indian—it doesn't matter who you are. When someone is in need, we should help," he said.

He encouraged the volunteers to place coin banks in even more locations. "Accumulating the money little by little is also a form of Great Love," he added. As the Malay proverb goes, "*Sikit sikit, lama-lama jadi bukit*"—little by little, over time, a hill is formed—a powerful reminder that small acts of kindness, repeated consistently, can grow into something extraordinary.

Not far away, the sound of sizzling noodles filled the air as vendor Chen Ming Cai (陳明才) called out warmly while working: "You're helping others—we must support that! Loving Stores, keep it up!"

Doing good doesn't require wealth, and giving isn't measured by the amount. A single kind thought and a bit of genuine sincerity are enough to keep love spreading. Each Loving Store is a reflection of its owner's goodwill. With invitations for kindness easily visible and "love" everywhere one looks, the streetscape gains a new sense of warmth and cheer. ❦

Directory of Tzu Chi Offices Worldwide

TAIWAN

Hualien: Headquarters

Tel: 886-3-8266779
Fax: 886-3-8267776

Taipei: Tzu Chi Humanitarian Center

Tel: 886-2-28989000
Fax: 886-2-28989994

ARGENTINA

Tel: 54-11-48625770
Fax: 54-11-43140252

AUSTRALIA

Adelaide

Tel: 61-8-82319008

Brisbane

Tel: 61-7-32727938
Fax: 61-7-32727283

Gold Coast

Tel: 61-7-55717706
Fax: 61-7-55717703

Melbourne

Tel: 61-3-98971668
Fax: 61-3-98974288

Perth

Tel/Fax: 61-8-92278228

Sydney

Tel: 61-2-98747666
Fax: 61-2-98747611

BRAZIL

Tel: 55-11-55394091

BRUNEI

Tel/Fax: 673-3336779

CANADA

Edmonton

Tel: 1-780-4639788
Fax: 1-780-4621799

Montreal

Tel: 1-514-8442074
Fax: 1-514-2889152

Toronto

Tel: 1-416-8868886
1-905-9471182
Fax: 1-416-9002048

Vancouver

Tel: 1-604-2667699
Fax: 1-604-2667659

DOMINICAN REP.

Tel: 1-809-5300972

EL SALVADOR

Tel/Fax: 1-503-7293905

FRANCE

Tel: 33-1-45860312
Fax: 33-1-45862540

GERMANY

Tel: 49-40-388439
Cell: 0049-152-2951-9571

GREAT BRITAIN

Tel: 44-20-88699864
Fax: 44-20-89334262

GUATEMALA

Tel: 502-22327648
Fax: 502-23675872

HONG KONG

Tel: 852-28937166
Fax: 852-28937478

INDONESIA

Tel: 62-21-50559999
Fax: 62-21-50556699

JAPAN

Tel: 81-3-32035651
Fax: 81-3-32035674

JORDAN

Tel/Fax: 962-6-5817305

LESOTHO

Tel: 266-28312566

MALAYSIA

Ipo

Tel: 60-5-5471013

Kedah

Tel: 60-4-7311013
Fax: 60-4-7321013

Kuala Lumpur

Tel: 60-3-62563800
Fax: 60-3-62563801

Melaka

Tel: 60-6-2810818
Fax: 60-6-2812796

Penang

Tel: 60-4-2281013
Fax: 60-4-2261013

MEXICO

Tel: 1-760-7688998
Fax: 1-760-7686631

MOZAMBIQUE

Cell: 258-849530241

MYANMAR

Tel: 95-9-260032810

NETHERLANDS

Tel: 31-629-577511

NEW ZEALAND

Tel: 64-9-2716976

PARAGUAY

Tel: 595-21-333818
Fax: 595-21-310588

PHILIPPINES

Tel/Fax: 63-2-7320001

SINGAPORE

Tel: 65-65829958

SOUTH AFRICA

Cape Town

Tel: 27-21-9130934
Fax: 27-21-9137057

Durban

Tel: 27-31-5615348
Fax: 27-31-5644438

Gauteng

Tel: 27-11-4503365/4502256

Ladysmith

Tel: 27-36-6341333
Fax: 27-36-6341261

Port Elizabeth

Tel/Fax: 27-41-3607033

SWEDEN

Tel/Fax: 46-31-227883

THAILAND

Tel: 66-2-3281161-3
Fax: 66-2-3281160

TÜRKIYE

Tel: 90-212-4225802
Fax: 90-212-4225803

UNITED STATES

San Dimas

Tel: 1-909-4477799
Fax: 1-909-4477948

Atlanta

Tel: 1-770-4581000

Austin

Tel: 1-512-4910358
Fax: 1-512-9261373

Boston

Tel: 1-617-7620569
Fax: 1-617-4314484

Cerritos

Tel: 1-562-9266609
Fax: 1-562-9261603

Chicago

Tel: 1-630-9636601
Fax: 1-630-9609360

Cleveland

Tel/Fax: 1-440-6469292

Columbus

Tel: 1-614-4579215
Fax: 1-614-4579217

Dallas

Tel: 1-972-6808869

Detroit

Tel/Fax: 1-586-7953491

Fresno

Tel/Fax: 1-559-2984894

Hawaii

Tel: 1-808-7378885
Fax: 1-808-7378889

Houston

Tel: 1-713-2709988
Fax: 1-713-9819008

Indianapolis

Tel: 1-317-5800979

Kansas

Tel: 1-913-3976517

Las Vegas

Tel/Fax: 1-702-8805552

Long Island

Tel: 1-516-8736888
Fax: 1-516-7460626

Los Angeles Northwest

Tel: 1-818-7277689
Fax: 1-818-7279272

Los Angeles West

Tel: 1-310-4735188
Fax: 1-310-4779518

Madison

Tel: 1-608-2687692

Miami

Tel: 1-954-5381172
Fax: 1-317-6459907

New Jersey

Tel: 1-973-8578666
Fax: 1-973-8579555

New York

Tel: 1-718-8880866
Fax: 1-718-4602068

Oakland

Tel: 1-510-8790971

Orlando

Tel: 1-407-2921146
Fax: 1-407-4793662

Phoenix

Tel: 1-480-8386556
Fax: 1-480-7777665

Pittsburgh

Tel: 1-412-5318343
Fax: 1-412-5318341

San Diego

Tel: 1-858-5460578
Fax: 1-858-5460573

San Francisco

Tel: 1-415-6820566
Fax: 1-415-6820567

San Jose

Tel: 1-408-4576969
Fax: 1-408-9438420

Seattle

Tel: 1-425-8227678
Fax: 1-425-8226169

St. Louis

Tel/Fax: 1-314-9941999

Washington DC

Tel: 1-703-7078606
Fax: 1-703-7078607

VIETNAM

Tel: 84-28-38535001
Fax: 84-28-38535055



Wherever we go, we are among family; wherever we stand is a place for spiritual practice.

—Dharma Master Cheng Yen

PHOTO BY HSIAO YIU-HWA