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I often say that Tzu Chi is a religious organization, and it is because there is a spirit that informs all our work, a sense of mission that inspires our efforts. When I use the term "religious", I don't mean subscribing to a certain set of beliefs or doctrines such as that of Buddhism or Christianity. To me, being religious is about finding life's true meaning and purpose, which in turn gives us direction. We each have our own path or direction in life. My life path, for example, is the monastic path. I have chosen to step outside the bonds of worldly love to embrace all humanity as my family. When there is a disaster somewhere and people are suffering, it breaks my heart and I feel deeply for their suffering. Everyone is my family so their suffering is my suffering, their hardship my hardship. This is what it means to leave one's small family and live for the big family of humanity, and this is the path I have chosen for myself—to shoulder humanity's burdens.

People ask me, "Isn't this a very difficult load to carry? Isn't it too much and too exhausting?" It is indeed not easy. Working for the wellbeing of humanity involves many different kinds of work. In Tzu Chi, we work in the fields of charity, medicine, education, and culture, including international disaster aid, running a bone marrow registry, environmental protection activities, and mobilizing a network of volunteers in the community. Every day, we visit impoverished families to provide love, care and financial aid, give medical care to the general public in our hospitals and regularly hold free medical outreaches for those who cannot afford medical care. We run schools in order to properly educate our next generation so that they can grow up with the right values and become people of character and integrity who can work for the good of society. We also have a television station to offer wholesome programming so that the minds of people in our society won't continually be contaminated by the sensationalism, violence, and distorted values widespread in the media today. This is our daily work. Should a disaster happen in any part of the world, it pains me just as if I am living in that country myself, and therefore we do our best to help, in what ways we can.

Yes, the work is difficult and it is a considerable load to shoulder. The heartache, pain, worry, and weight of responsibility I feel every day is very heavy indeed. But I take it on happily, with willingness. Though I could have lived a solitary life of contemplation, I have chosen this path and so I carry all its accompanying burdens without complaint. Because I do it willingly, I embrace everything that comes with it with joy.

As my life work is to be of service to humanity, I must look after my health if I am to continue this work. I make sure that I am healthy in body and mind so that I can work. This is because this work is my life purpose; I live to carry out such work and make a contribution.

But for some, their work is only a means to earn a living. The purpose of working, to them, is to make money to support their daily needs. When they think in such a way, their minds are not oriented toward service but toward making money for themselves. They are not happy when

## Life, Work, and the Religious Spirit

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working since it's something they do because they have to, in order to support themselves. The work is a chore and it becomes tiring. It's not something they do willingly.

When people make money in order to achieve a certain quality of life, there is often never a point where they feel they have enough. When they are in this mindset, they will always set their sights on more. Gaining one dollar, they think of how nice it will be if they have nine more, to make an even ten. Having ten dollars, they'll think about having a hundred dollars. Having a hundred dollars, they'll think of having a thousand, and on it goes. The bar keeps getting raised higher. I call this mindset "having one but always lacking nine". Despite having much, such people still feel there is something lacking. Therefore, they are never really happy and at peace. Such a life is actually not very pleasant.

But there is the possibility of another way to live—that of living to work, to live to make a contribution to the world. Instead of living to gain, one lives to give. When we were building the Tzu Chi Hospital in Hualien, there was a woman who decided to hire herself out as a maid so she could earn money for the project. Not being wealthy, she didn't have money to donate, but being able-bodied, she felt what she could offer was her labor. She signed a contract with a family to serve as their maid for three years. She essentially indentured herself so that she could help me build the hospital. Despite the menial and physically draining work, she felt very happy. It is a kind of happiness that people who work only to make money for themselves do not experience. Instead of being tired, she felt a lot of energy and joy because she was filled with a sense of purpose and love.

This is the kind of life I would call a religious life. All religions teach the spirit of love, be it Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism, and when we are inspired by this love, we will feel a sense of purpose and willingly dedicate ourselves to working for the good of the world. When we do so, we will live to work rather than work for the sake of making a living. This is the happiest life.

From Dharma Master Cheng Yen's Talks  
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