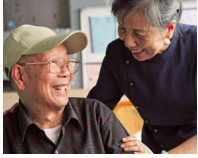


The Art of Helping Others

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Saturday, 25 April 2009 00:00

Lai Mei-zhi, age 73, has been making regular house calls and caring for the needy since she was certified as a Tzu Chi commissioner in 1986. Having dedicated herself to charity work for the past 23 years, she offers a unique perspective on helping people living in hardship. Lai says that being sincere in interacting with those she helps and being consistent in word and conduct is her secret to remaining firm, strong, and focused in her charity work.



Lai is very fond of painting and traveling. However, she finds that the joy gained through those interests is temporary, while the joy derived from helping others is everlasting. She considers making house calls and caring for the needy especially meaningful because when a person is helped, his or her whole family is helped too. The benefit for society that Lai creates is thus multiplied many times beyond her direct contributions. In her philosophy of life, it is a blessing to be loved by others—but being able to bring love and care to others is a greater blessing and something of inexpressible value.

Lai Mei-zhi (賴美之) was born in 1937, the same year that marked the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Although her family was better off than most during this time, she spent most of her childhood witnessing the harsh realities of war. During that time, she saw how her grandmother and father cared for the sick and the poor. It helped her grow into a compassionate and empathetic person.

Life in war-torn Taiwan was very difficult for most people. Medical supplies were extremely tight, so Lai's grandmother and father provided free medicine for people with malaria and tuberculosis. Her father donated money to help rebuild local schools damaged or destroyed in air raids. Food was scarce too. When people begged their family for food, Lai's grandmother generously gave them bowls filled with food.

Lai's grandmother and father also helped to shelter families that had fled from the cities to the countryside during the war to seek refuge from intense bombardments. Those refugees had little to eat, sometimes only salty pastry dough made of soy pulp or rice porridge with vegetables. It was barely enough to sustain them. Children attempting to scoop up a few more rice grains when filling up their bowls risked being spanked for their greediness. Seeing young children disciplined in this way saddened Lai, then seven years old. She tried to cheer up the kids by exchanging her white rice for their far less tasty pastry dough. She said, for their benefit, that she liked soy pulp better anyway.

The family's kindness and compassion continued even after the war. Japanese was the official language in Taiwan during the Japanese occupation of the island (1895-1945). In 1945, after Japan's surrender brought the war to an end, the Nationalist government from China regained control of the island. After the change in government, many people had to learn to speak Mandarin, the national language of China. Lai's father took the initiative to hire teachers to teach villagers.

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Lai's grandmother and father served as exemplary models of kindness and generosity for the young girl. Her father used these instances of generosity to teach Lai the proper manner of giving when providing food or money to others. For example, he taught her it was very important to squat down beside the beggars when giving them money. By no means should she stand up and toss the money casually into their bowls. That would have been very disrespectful.

Because of the loving examples set by her grandmother and father, Lai is full of compassion and knows the importance of respecting others while giving. Over 20 years ago, she joined Tzu Chi and began volunteering for charity work. Though very fond of painting and traveling, she has chosen to devote all her spare time and energy to making house calls and caring for Tzu Chi care recipients. Through her house calls, she strives to better understand the needs of those living in hardship so that she can truly help relieve their suffering.

Giving people what they need the most

What Lai has to deal with every day is far different from what she experienced in the well-to-do family where she grew up. Nevertheless, she remains firm in her resolve to care for the elderly, the sick and the poor, and people who have lost loved ones to natural disasters.



“The greater compassion one has when caring for the needy, the more courage one possesses,” said Lai. “The most important thing is sincerity. Only with sincerity can you truly care for the needy with Great Love and have the determination to help them improve their lives, no matter what difficulties you encounter.”

Lai recalled the first time she helped clean up the house of an elderly care recipient. The house was dark and dirty and smelled awful, and it was infested with cockroaches. When she opened the lid of a blackened, greasy pot, maggots crawled out onto her hand.

Lai and over ten other volunteers spent three days cleaning up that house. Lai was overwhelmed with inner joy when she saw the woman wearing clean clothes and eating her meals with the new utensils provided by Tzu Chi volunteers. At that moment, she came to realize the truth in something Master Cheng Yen once said: By paying home visits to the needy, one gets to see both hell- and heaven-like situations manifested on Earth.

Lai thinks it is very important to guide the needy to identify the root cause of their own suffering. Some suffer mentally, some financially, while some have difficulties getting along with others. The reasons are as varied as the number of care recipients. Therefore, the responsibility of the volunteers is to identify the source of a person's suffering so that they can find the right way to help them.

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Xu Rui-qiong (徐瑞琼), a staff member at the Tzu Chi Taipei branch office, commended Lai for being a truly good leader: “No matter what difficulties she encounters, Sister Lai is never daunted or deterred. She always tries to find the best way to help and guide the needy.”

How, exactly, can one best help the needy? Lai observed that one has to be mindful when paying home visits to find out what’s really afflicting the needy. Experience is also important. It is essential to listen to Master Cheng Yen’s talks to learn from her wisdom, and to stay informed of relevant laws and regulations, as well as trends in society. Only then can one truly help the underserved.

Treating the needy with respect and sincerity

It was not until Lai was in her 40s that she learned how to paint. “I didn’t have even the most basic understanding of colors. I had no idea that mixing yellow and blue produced green. My teacher said that I learned to paint through sheer effort. Learning to paint was very hard for me, but I eventually began to enjoy it. The greatest joy that painting brings me is to make me feel more confident in myself.” Learning to paint not only helped strengthen her aesthetic sense, but her willpower as well.



While painting and traveling give her joy, volunteering is something from which others can benefit. It makes an everlasting impact on others as well as filling her own life with meaning and contentment. Lai views paying home visits and interacting with others as an art form that needs to be learned, just like painting.

She likens the skills she uses when she visits care recipients to those of a painter. The artist has to develop a sense of how to apply the paint when creating a work of art. To create a good painting, certain parts need more brushwork while other parts require less. It takes a good eye, a steady hand, and an artist’s heart to produce quality paintings.

This is a perfect analogy of the skills that Lai uses when she interacts with those she visits. When making house calls, she needs to show respect for the needy but at the same time refrain from pampering or indulging them. She needs to know the proper things to say and how best to say them. She doesn’t barge into people’s lives and make them ashamed of their situation. She has an artist’s finesse when dealing with the people she helps.

Lai has always kept in mind the Master’s teaching that the best place for self-cultivation is among people. Serving others helps one grow in wisdom. She believes that helping one person creates a beneficial ripple effect that extends far and wide. Helping one person to stand on his or her own feet helps that person’s entire family, and it also helps society in the long run as that person is again enabled to make positive contributions to society. By taking up Tzu Chi’s work

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of paying home visits to people in need, Lai has found her meaning in life and has gained spiritual joy. Like painting, helping the needy is a beautiful experience. However, she enjoys helping others even more as she deeply appreciates the meaning and value behind the action.

Most women Lai's age lead a leisurely, retired life. But despite being in her seventies, she is always busy with volunteer work. Her schedule is always full—volunteering has become a major part of her everyday life. Everyone in her family supports her dedication to charity work, caring for the poor and the sick.

“Mom likes beautiful things, and that makes her more easily drawn to the beauty and goodness in human nature,” said Lai's daughter. “That can perhaps explain her devotion to volunteer work.” Lai's mindfulness and dedication to caring for those in need has made quite an impact on her youngest son: “Mom is a very sincere person, and she always does solid work. Such an attitude has greatly influenced me.”

“Paying home visits to the needy seems to have opened a new window for Mom,” Lai's oldest son added. “All that she encounters while volunteering makes her life more colorful and fuller. She gains so much joy from her volunteer work.”

Lawyer Chen Wen-song (陳文松), Lai's husband, is proud that his wife can make the best use of her abilities to help others. “She works tirelessly, and she's fully dedicated to her charity work. Through her volunteering, she's turning her life into a most beautiful painting.”

Viewing her work with the needy as an art that needs to be learned, Lai takes each step firmly, just as she did when learning to paint. In this way, she demonstrates to everyone around her a life of beauty, goodness, and wisdom.

Helping Others Is an Art

Q: You must have overcome many challenges as you grew from a beginner who knew nothing about painting to an accomplished artist skilled in sketches, watercolors, and oils. Does the strong willpower you developed by learning to paint help you when doing volunteer work?



A: I live my days very seriously, and I like to make use of my free time to learn new things. Everyone encounters challenges when learning something new, myself included. But I don't give up when confronted with difficulties in learning. Rather, I am motivated to work even harder to overcome such challenges.

I'm easily attracted to beautiful things, so I had a practical motive to learn painting—to decorate my house. But after I had become proficient, a question began to gnaw at me: For what purpose did I learn to paint?

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The sense of fulfillment that had at first come from learning to paint gradually gave way to one of loss and uncertainty. I had learned to paint simply to fulfill my personal interest and to give my family a more beautiful living environment, but deep down I felt that I could lead a fuller and more meaningful life. That's when I decided to serve as a full-time volunteer and dedicate myself wholeheartedly to caring for the needy through regular home visits.

When I first started, the amount of aid and subsidies we gave care recipients was based purely on the judgment of the volunteers doing the home visit. We didn't have a good system to evaluate whether the amount being provided was too much or too little. I often had doubts: Why did one care recipient receive more aid than another? Why did one receive less? Why did another care recipient receive nothing at all? Torn between reason and emotion, I asked myself over and over: "Am I being fair? Am I doing the right thing?"

These questions prompted me to look into the government's social welfare policy on low-income families. I visited a number of municipal departments and district offices to gather information that would allow me to help my care recipients more effectively. Such research helped me ensure that my care recipients were receiving the most appropriate amount of assistance for their situation. This calmed my mind and my heart no longer felt so heavy.

Rain or shine, day or night, we pay regular home visits to the needy and provide them with long-term care. Such long-term care might last one year, five years, or even as long as ten years. No matter how long it lasts, a sense of fulfillment fills my heart when I see that my care recipients can finally stand on their own feet again. Even better is when they in turn are inspired to help others.

I will continue to help others in this way as long as I can. Helping and caring for the needy is the right path to walk in life.

Q: The backgrounds, ages, and experiences of the volunteers with whom you work vary, yet you all share the same ideals in doing charity work. How do you look at such a team?

A: Master Cheng Yen often says as long as we are mindful of what we do, we can be as good as the professionals. This is true no matter what we do. All the knowledge in the world is of no use if we simply focus on analyzing what we know without putting it into practice.

We have become proficient in our volunteer work through experience. By making house call after house call, we accumulate experience and hands-on knowledge. This allows us to effectively provide the needy with the help they require, whether it be short-term aid or long-term care. We may know little professional jargon, but we know how to let the care recipients feel our care for them.

I remember that after a major earthquake in 1999, many soldiers were sent to the disaster areas to help. They had to turn over corpses once every two hours to prevent the bodies from sticking to the surface of the refrigerated containers. Many of the soldiers were very young and inevitably became scared. Our volunteers assured them gently and kindly that they were here to help, and that the deceased would feel only gratitude for their efforts—there was no reason to

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be afraid. I felt that even professional counselors or social workers couldn't have done better when I saw how serene and wise the volunteers were in comforting the soldiers.

When extending care to others, the key to being professional is to ask ourselves whether we have been mindful, whether we have treated our care recipients like our own family, and whether we are sincere in whatever we do and say. That's what it means to be professional.

Q: When it comes to caring for the needy, are there any rules or steps to follow?

A: Caring for others is an art form; there are no step-by-step rules to follow. But we do need to keep in mind what's taught in Buddhism: Great Kindness even to strangers, and Great Compassion for all. With that, we'll be able to empathize with those in need all the more.

When it comes to doing charity work, compassion and wisdom should go hand in hand. Neither of them is dispensable. We demonstrate compassion when we can give others a helping hand without hesitation. We show wisdom when we can make close observations and thorough assessments before making right judgments.



When we sincerely care for the needy, we naturally expect that they will open their hearts to accept us too. Unfortunately, sometimes those who we're trying to help may not be honest with us. They may try to hide things from us. When things like that happen, we should remain sincere and understanding and continue to bring them love and care. Only then can we win their trust and get them to open their hearts so that together we can work to solve the problems that are afflicting them.

It's also important to bear in mind that we should not force our help on others or interfere in situations where we can do no good. At times, what we have to deal with can be very complicated. There may be psychological problems or serious family disputes. By no means should we make personal judgments on others. Neither should we force ourselves to solve problems beyond our ability to control.

Q: Over the past couple of years, the number of Tzu Chi care recipients has increased sharply. Take northern Taiwan for example: volunteers have to pay home visits to more than 6,000 families every month. It seems that no matter how hard you try, there are still more people out there living in hardship. Does that frustrate you?

A: The Master often shares with us the importance of cherishing a broad and pure heart. That is also what has given me strength in steadfastly caring for the needy over the years. I simply do what I'm supposed to do without worrying about things too much. Helping one person might make a difference to his or her entire family. Therefore, all I do is dedicate myself single-mindedly to helping the needy so that their suffering can be relieved.

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Although it is hard work, I feel blessed that I am able to love and help so many people in need.

Q: You are exposed to so many stories of helplessness and sorrow in your work with the needy and the disadvantaged. How do you keep your own mood from being affected?

A: I didn't know much about Buddhism before I joined Tzu Chi, but I have gradually come to understand that whatever suffering and affliction one has is actually a result of the karmic law of cause and effect. This insight has enabled me to view suffering and affliction with a more open heart. This helps me stay focused on finding a way to help lift people out of their suffering rather than on letting their suffering get me down.

The Buddha spoke of the Four Noble Truths, which explain how the world we live in is full of suffering. Paying home visits to people in need and seeing what hard lives they lead helps us realize the power of karmic retribution. It also reminds us of the need to let go of our worries and resentment, to stay out of disputes, and to form good affinities with others to create good karma for ourselves. So instead of making us depressed, our exposure to the tragic stories of our care recipients actually helps our spiritual cultivation.

Q: You have gone to the scenes of several major disasters to care for survivors that had lost beloved family members. Given the devastation at the scene and the deep grief and sorrow of the family members, how do you prepare yourself to volunteer in such places?

A: The Heart Sutra says that when we are free of all attachments, our minds will know no vexation or hindrance; they will shun fear, distraction, and fantasy. While serving at the scenes of major disasters, I have no attachments. All that is in my mind is how to ease the pain of the victims and help them calm their minds so that they can arrange the funerals for the deceased. With such pure and upright thoughts, I have no fear in my heart.

I'm calm and composed in the face of suffering. It's not that I don't feel for the victims. It's just that I need to keep my wits about me to decide what they need most at the time.

Although reason usually reigns on those occasions, there was one time I gave in to tears. That was when I volunteered at the scene of an airplane crash on an offshore island in 2002.

At the site, I saw a son collapse in front of the refrigerated container that held his parents' bodies. With tears streaming down his face, he repeated over and over again, "Papa, I hope I can still be your son in my next lifetime..." It brought me great heartache, and I stayed by his side all the way through to keep him company. It was so heartrending that I couldn't help but cry myself.

Q: Sometimes care recipients are unable to clean up their homes. At times a house can be dirty and disorderly beyond imagination. It thus falls to Tzu Chi volunteers to help them clean up their houses during their home visits. Does that pose a big challenge to you?

A: Our volunteers reach out to give whenever their help is needed. I believe that so long as we are sincere in helping others, we will naturally give of ourselves willingly and joyfully. So, no

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matter how filthy and dirty the environment we have to help clean up, we can always be peaceful and at ease.

Q: As one from a well-to-do family, how did you bring yourself to understand and feel for the suffering of people in poverty?



A: I went through the Second World War when I was little, so I witnessed firsthand the devastation, poverty, and suffering inflicted by the war.

During the war, we lived in the countryside. The old lady living next to us went up to the mountains every day to collect materials for making straw sandals. That was how she earned her living. Her hands were covered with calluses. Her only meal, day in and day out, was watery porridge with stir-fried garlic. The life of poverty she led left a deep impression on my mind.

When I was little, most people in Taiwan lived about the same as that neighbor. Poverty was prevalent at that time. But despite such materially deprived living conditions, people were kind and simple. Instead of complaining about the hard life they led, they all worked hard to earn a living. Perhaps because everyone around them was in pretty much the same situation, they did not think their life was particularly hard. What I saw and experienced when I was little allowed me to view poverty from another perspective, and I even came to appreciate how one can be happy and optimistic despite being poor.

In college, I used to conduct surveys for the city government on poverty-related issues. After graduation I worked for a family planning association, and so I sometimes had the chance to visit the poor. When I learned of Tzu Chi in the 1980s, it seemed just natural that I should join and take up the work of making house calls to the needy.

I feel that most people nowadays have lost themselves to greed. They seek wealth and fame, have many wants and desires, and tend to spend money without thinking. Even so, contentment and happiness elude them. Their lives, when compared to that of those in poverty, are actually none the happier.

Q: What have you learned the most over more than 20 years of volunteering for Tzu Chi and caring for the needy?

A: Over the years, I've come to an especially deep understanding of the Four Considerations: Consider the body as impure; consider the senses as sources of suffering; consider the mind as impermanent and ever-changing; consider all existence as impermanent.

I've learned that if we truly want to understand what impermanence is, we need to go serve people and see for ourselves life's suffering.

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Finally, I've learned that while it is a blessing to be loved by others, being able to love others is even more of a blessing and something of greater value.

Compiled by Chen Mei-xiu, Li Wei-huang

Translated by Evelyn Yi-chih Sung

Photographs by Hsiao Yiu-hwa