

A Confluence of Love from Allah and the Buddha

Written by Liu Ya-xian

Friday, 25 September 2009 00:00

[[T]]he mission of the seven-year old Al-Ashriyyah Nurul Iman Islamic Boarding School is to instill in its students love, virtue, character, and a capacity to care about others—in other words, to make them exemplary Muslims. With this mission, it is no surprise that ‘Nurul Iman’ means radiant faith, dazzling belief, or bright light of conviction.

When the Buddha’s compassion is combined with such “radiant faith,” the School is immersed in Great Love, the universal expression of love that is shared among all religions. “Love from all around makes us want for nothing,” proclaims Elder Habib Saggaf, the founder of the School.



In this way, an Islamic boarding school and a Buddhist charity organization guide students as they journey through life’s tests and progress toward decency, maturity, and spiritual fulfillment.

Smoke from burning firewood gently rises as the aroma of hot, cooking rice permeates the kitchen and the campus beyond.

Dressed in traditional Indonesian white shirts and Islamic caps, a group of boys with huge bamboo spatulas stir the rice in giant woks. The smoke-blackened woks rest on four enormous firewood stoves. From time to time, the boys add more firewood to maintain the intense heat.

“O.K. it’s ready,” Malik reported, after he had tasted the rice to make sure that it was cooked. Quickly he added, “Give me the buckets.”

Several boys came over to scoop rice from a wok into waiting containers. Soon, over 50 kilograms of cooked, steaming rice had been emptied into the buckets. A pole was then inserted through the handle of each laden container and shouldered by two boys, who delivered the rice to the hungry crowd.



Once a wok was emptied, Malik filled it with another batch of rice that had been rinsed and was waiting to be cooked. “We have to cook at least 20 woks full of rice every day,” said Malik as he started a new batch.

Feeding 7,500 people per day in the Al-Ashriyyah Nurul Iman Islamic Boarding School (more commonly referred to as “the School”) is no easy task. They have to keep the fires burning constantly. We asked Malik where such a massive amount of rice comes from.

Pointing to sacks of rice labeled in Chinese, he replied, “It’s donated by Tzu Chi in Taiwan.” It seemed amazing for us to consider that rice shipped from Taiwan by a Buddhist charity organization provides daily nourishment for Islamic students in an Islamic boarding school in the suburbs of Jakarta.

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Allah-assigned responsibilities



Raise gentle, altruistic, and loving Muslims to rectify the misconceptions that the world has unjustifiably attached to Islam.

Located in Parung, Bogor, north of Jakarta, the School was founded in 1998 by Elder Habib Saggaf, a descendant of the Islamic Prophet Mohammed. Elder Habib is a well-respected and well-liked religious leader. He has an aura of wisdom about him, but often impresses people with his easygoing personality. Understandably, two of his favorite conversation topics are his numerous students and the School, which he single-handedly started and nurtured to become what it is today.

“In the beginning, I wasn’t thinking of establishing a religious school,” said Elder Habib, now 60 years old. He explained that he was approached by a strange man who claimed he had dreamed of Habib. The stranger had searched all over Indonesia for Elder Habib before finally finding him and inviting him to Parung to start a school. Whenever he recounts this incredible episode, Elder Habib adds that it must have been Allah’s will for him to come to Parung to carry out this duty.

Although the School offers many classes found in many secular schools, the emphasis of its curriculum is the study of, and compliance with, the Islamic scriptures. According to Elder Habib, Islam is gentle and kind, a religion that can bring people peace and happiness. “It is a loving religion. Unfortunately, many people gravely misunderstand Islam and have the misconception that it brings war and disturbs peace.” He has resolved to counter this misconception by teaching the true practice of Islam to the School’s students in their formative years.

With this mission on his shoulders and many people chipping in to help, Elder Habib is helping the students to develop into decent Muslims who can counter the misconceptions that the outside world has attributed to the Islamic faith. Since its inception in 1998, the School has offered tuition-free instruction in a wide range of classes from kindergarten to college level. Room and board is also provided free of charge. Offering an excellent education for free has attracted students from all over Indonesia, including orphans and children from destitute and broken families. I asked Elder Habib how many students came when the school first started. He smiled and held up one finger. “One, just one student. That’s how we got started.” Now, more than 6,000 students are enrolled at the School. When faculty, staff, and support personnel are included, there are about 7,500 people to feed each day.

In addition to food, the faculty and staff must receive regular paychecks. All of this entails a huge expenditure of money, but the only source of income is donations. Because donations are often variable and unpredictable, the School frequently faces tight budgets.

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Despite the difficulty in making ends meet, Elder Habib told us that he could not turn a prospective student away. Every child needs guidance and lessons. Furthermore, many children will literally walk away hungry if not admitted to the School. How can he say 'no' to them?

"I have always felt a heavy burden on my shoulders. I pray to Allah for strength and guidance to carry on. Allah indeed has sent us the representatives from Tzu Chi to assist us." Elder Habib's gratitude to Tzu Chi was clearly evident on his face and in his voice.

Messengers of Great Love



With the Buddha's love, Tzu Chi volunteers will accompany the children as they grow and develop.

The Tzu Chi Foundation began its relationship with the Al-Ashriyyah Nurul Iman Islamic Boarding School in 2003, when the Taiwanese government donated 50,000 tons of rice to Indonesia. The Tzu Chi Indonesia branch was designated to distribute the rice to those that needed it most. Indonesian Social Minister Bachtiar Chamsyah, who was familiar with both Tzu Chi and the financially strapped boarding school, recommended that the foundation donate some of the rice to the School. The relationship between Tzu Chi and the School has broadened and deepened since then.

After the initial rice donation, the Tzu Chi Indonesia branch began donating 50 tons of rice each month to the School. The monthly donations started in October 2003, and have continued steadily for the past two years.

However, Tzu Chi's involvement with the School is not limited to donations of rice. Since May 2004, medical volunteers with the Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA) have held more than six free clinics on the school campus. "The Tzu Chi doctors come to check on our kids," noted Elder Habib. "They treat the kids as their own. This medical assistance has greatly lightened our financial burden."

For example, overcrowded quarters and shared clothing in the past resulted in rampant contagious respiratory and dermatological disorders. But by treating the conditions and teaching students how to avoid transmitting diseases, the number of these illnesses has dropped. During the sixth free clinic in August 2005, TIMA doctors discovered that skin disorders among children at the School had dropped by as much as 25 percent since the first clinic had been held the year before.

Tzu Chi has also helped alleviate the crowded living conditions that help contribute to such outbreaks. As enrollment at the School ballooned, the existing buildings on campus began bursting at the seams. Tzu Chi decided to do something to alleviate the overcrowded conditions, and in August 2004 ground was broken for new facilities.

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At the groundbreaking ceremony, Elder Habib referred to the Koran as he noted how Tzu Chi's charity transcended religious and cultural differences. He proclaimed to the gathered crowd, "Allah created human beings and commanded them to love, respect, and help one another. Even coming from different nations or races, when we truly communicate and promote understanding among ourselves, we all stand by the side of Allah."

Eleven months later, the construction of an L-shaped, 2-story building with 26 classrooms was complete. The new building provides 2,380 square meters (25,700 square feet) of badly needed space. The School invited Tzu Chi volunteers to attend the opening ceremony in July 2005.

To welcome the Tzu Chi volunteers, students played traditional Indonesian musical instruments, sang songs, and opened beautifully and specially decorated parasols. In Islamic culture, such unique umbrellas are reserved exclusively for showing the utmost respect.

Rubiah, the "valedictorian" for this special event, addressed the Tzu Chi volunteers. "We cannot repay you for the favors that you have so generously given us. But we can pray to Allah to confer upon you His highest blessings. We wish you peace, luck, health, and longevity."

Guo Zai-yuan, the local Tzu Chi representative, showered his best wishes and encouragement on the students, and he promised that Tzu Chi volunteers would accompany and support them as they learn and grow.

Elder Habib expressed his most sincere gratitude for the care and love that Tzu Chi had given to the School. He also commended the foundation for sprinkling the world with love, without regard to religion, race, or culture. "We are unable to give the children here any luxuries, but love from all around makes us affluent," he exclaimed.

Sailing Toward You



Tzu Chi built an L-shaped, 2-story building with 26 classrooms for the School. Here are three scenes from the opening ceremony on July 17, 2005. Elder Habib indicated in the ceremony that Tzu Chi conforms to the Koran's teachings. He encouraged students to learn to spread the Great Love that is shared by Islam and Buddhism.

One student dedicated a poem to Master Cheng Yen, and recited it during the opening ceremony.

It was entitled, "**I Miss You**":

Your heart is as wide as an ocean, but filled with love.

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However, I have yet to fully understand the profound meaning of the ocean.

Your heart is as bright and pure as a pearl.

However, I lack the strength to row the boat to reach your embrace.

Nevertheless, you will stay within my heart forever, and we shall miss you forever,

And you shall live within my heart, because I do not wish to leave you.

Training to be independent



Worshiping, studying the Koran, cooking, washing clothes—the students follow stringent rules and take care of their own everyday lives.

In Islamic culture, genders are strictly separated. Therefore, the male and female students have their own separate quarters. Most of the male students live in huts, and the rest stay in the mosque on campus. The female living quarters, as well as their classrooms and library, are completely fenced off from the male population. Males are not allowed to enter these areas.

Gamar binti Saggaf is the residential manager for the entire female population on campus. She also happens to be Elder Habib's daughter. She showed us where the children lived and studied.

The children live simply—in each room, between 50 and 90 of them sleep on the floor, one right next to the other. There are no electric fans or air conditioning. In the morning, they pile their blankets and pillows in a corner and transform their sleeping quarters into a classroom.

They all take turns doing chores. Those on duty are roused at 3:30 in the morning to begin preparations for breakfast and any other duties that must be completed for the coming day. Regardless of age, everyone takes care of his or her own chores.

Everyone on campus worships five times each day. The first prayer is held at 4:00 a.m. After the first worship exercise, their day, whether it be attending classes or studying the Koran, starts.

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Additionally, male students who are in high school or college have a special responsibility: cooking for the school. Although meals are simple, consisting only of rice and some sauce, preparing them is such an enormous task that responsibility for the meals rotates among teams of boys. Each team consists of 15 boys who share the duty for three months at a time. Malik, who is now in college, happened to be on duty the day I visited the kitchen. “Not every boy comes every single day,” he explained. “Classes take precedence. We come here only when we don’t have classes to attend.”



Malik, who has been at the School for five years, told me how the cooking teams evolved. Before there were not so many students, Elder Habib had asked neighbors near the school to cook for the students and staff. Older students would come to help with the cooking, but only on holidays. Soon, however, the burgeoning student population overwhelmed the ability of the neighbors to prepare the meals. The responsibility naturally fell to student volunteers. All-student cooking teams have been used since that time.

“I feel really lucky here,” said Malik. “I used to fight and quarrel all the time on the streets. Now things have changed for the better for me.”

His gratitude for what the school has done for him is a common feeling among the students. In fact, many students remain in the school to serve even after they have graduated. Gamar, the females’ residential manager, is one example of this. “I can’t bear to see my father so busy. I can’t leave the students, either. So I stay on and help out.”

School doubles as home



Whether parentless or born dirt-poor, students can grow and learn in peace, protected in this stable and nurturing environment without worrying about food and shelter.

Students live on campus year-round, except for the holy month of Ramadan. During this special season, students are allowed to stay home—if they have one. The fact is, most children at the School are either orphans or from very poor families. Therefore, the School is more than a school for them—it is a home, too. “When they stay at the School, I will not let them go hungry,” Elder Habib explained with compassion in his voice.

What if a child becomes homesick? Gamar said that new students are especially prone to homesickness, and that is why companions are so important. Gamar pays special attention to how the new children are adapting and helps those who seem to be having a hard time.

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Once a week, the Al-Ashriyyah Nurul Iman Islamic Boarding School livens up. Each Sunday is family day, when families are allowed to come and visit their children. This Sunday, we watched as one student, Nurlela, welcomed her father, grandmother, younger sister, and even a neighbor. They brought food that Nurlela's mother had made especially for her.

"Her mother came last time, so it's my turn today," said her father, Yunus, with a smile. He feels that his daughter has matured and become more sensible by attending this school. Therefore, even though it is hard for him to leave her here, he feels that the separation has been well worthwhile.

We witnessed another reunion, that of a young girl, Nining, and her mother Sunartun. Nining had been at the school for just over a week, and she apparently had had a rough time adjusting to her new surroundings. Only 12 years old, her little face was devoid of any smile as she waited for her mother. When her mother greeted her, she almost burst into tears. Sunartun was really worried about her.

Sunartun told me some of Nining's background. When the girl was in the third grade, her birth mother passed away. A few months later, her birth father was killed in an accident. Taking pity on this little orphan girl, Sunartun's father, who lived in the same village, asked Sunartun to adopt her.

When they first met, Nining was dressed in threadbare clothes and holding a small, ragged knapsack containing an old book, a few coins, and a can of seasoning powder. Sunartun explained, "When the child was hungry, she ate that seasoning powder."

This little girl had nobody to turn to, so even though Sunartun's own family was not wealthy, they decided to adopt the little girl. As quickly as she had lost her first family, Nining gained a new family with a loving mom and dad. She was also blessed with an elder brother with whom she got along very well. Four years have passed since that time.

Her mother told us about the day that Nining decided she wanted to attend the School. "One day, out of the blue, Nining told me that she wanted to attend the Al-Ashriyyah Nurul Iman Islamic Boarding School. She had already packed her stuff." Sunartun suspected that Nining was doing this because she did not want to burden her parents, who were working very hard to support the family. The girl's mind was made up, and Sunartun could only go along with her request.

Nining had never been a talkative or outgoing girl, but she was even more sullen now. Sunartun was saddened by her countenance. "Although she asked to enroll in the School herself, I still can't bear to see her act like this."

Nining asked her mother to bring some oranges on her next visit. At this request, Sunartun left the school and went straight to the market. She immediately returned to the School with oranges, much to Nining's delight. Although Nining is adopted, Sunartun loves and treats Nining as her own daughter.

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In a maternal voice, Sunartun told us, "I would have loved for her to stay with us at home. Without her, our home is too quiet, almost cheerless. But we really hope that she can have a brighter future by being here."

* * *

As we toured the campus on a sunny afternoon, we saw a few girls washing clothes by hand in a sink. Because the younger ones were not strong enough to wring out the wet clothes, the older girls helped the younger ones hang the clothes up to drip-dry in the sun.

Gamar told me that girls, regardless of their age, must learn to wash their own clothes and do chores around the campus. The younger students might not be able to do the chores as well as the older students at first, so the older students in their living unit take care and cover for younger ones. About 100 students live in the same unit, so everybody eats, lives, and works together. The process seems to work well, and the younger ones learn quickly as they grow up.

"The School not only teaches the type of knowledge found in books, but it also provides an ideal environment for students to learn how to live and deal properly with people," commented Gamar.

Elder Habib added, "The Koran says that one must be tested with all sorts of challenges before one can really grow up."

Sunartun told me during her Sunday visitation that she would take Nining home if her daughter were unable to adapt to living away from home. "After all, she is my child and I cannot bear to see her suffer." However, she wanted Nining to give the School and herself a little more time. As a faithful Muslim, Sunartun knows well that Allah will give everyone a challenge here and there, and this is exactly the kind of hurdle that Nining must learn to jump.

At the same time that Sunartun and Nining were preparing to part, another family was saying farewell to their child. The parents were showing the ambivalent emotions of sadness and hope: sadness at parting, and hope for a brighter future for their child, as bright as the afternoon sun overhead.

Translated by Tang Yau-yang

Photos by Lin Yan-huang

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