

TIMA Promotes Vegetarianism as the Most Potent Epidemic Prevention and Health Protection Measure

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The annual convention of the Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA), which usually falls around the time of the Moon Festival, assembles all association members. Looking back, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in late 2019 after successful conclusion of the convention scheduled for that year. The epidemic in Taiwan had been brought under control by the time of the 2020 Convention, which enabled TIMA members in Taiwan to physically participate in this event in the Hualien Jing Si Hall, while overseas members joined via video conference. In view of the raging epidemic at the time of the Moon Festival in 2021, it was decided to move the convention online. As a result, TIMA members could only meet on a cloud-based platform in that year.



In the 2022 annual TIMA convention, it was again possible to conduct in-person courses in Hualien and a hybrid physical and online format was readopted.

Why do annual TIMA Conventions have such a high turnout and why do participants gain so much from them? I often share a symbolic little story. Right after the inauguration of Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital in 2000, the wards had not been fully opened and a lot of space was available. The hospital was therefore selected as the venue for the second annual TIMA convention. One of the invitees was a retired Indonesian air force general who was greatly impressed by the VIP treatment he received each time he visited Taiwan. He pointed out that he was always picked up at the airport right after his plane landed. The organizers always arranged five-star accommodation for him and he was seated in the first row in all meetings he attended. He was therefore taken aback to be seated toward the rear of the TIMA venue and was forced to sleep on a hard bunk bed. The fact that he was not treated as a VIP at the TIMA Convention enabled him to fully appreciate the genuine human warmth extended by Tzu Chi and he expressed his intention to participate again in the next convention. This story exemplifies the touching nature of Tzu Chi humanities and epitomizes

the direction of the efforts of the Tzu Chi Medical Mission in implementing human-oriented medical care by harnessing the innate energy of life.

TIMA members around the globe had been forced to suspend their volunteer medical consultations and home visits over the past two years. However, they immediately resumed such activities as circumstances allowed under the premise of comprehensive epidemic prevention measures to safeguard their own health and that of their patients. This sense of mission that unites medical practitioners in all countries and regions is extremely touching.

I often stress that medical professionals should reflect on the difference between job and profession. Health care should be viewed as a sacred profession which is capable of making unique contributions to our societies and populations instead of merely a job to earn a living.

My personal experiences and observations over the past twenty to thirty years clearly indicate that healthcare workers or volunteers who have participated in volunteer medical

consultations have all expressed a strong desire to participate in similar activities in the future and make much needed contributions in even more remote corners that are characterized by an even more severe lack of resources. When physicians return to their familiar workplaces after conclusion of such volunteer consultation activities, they truly cherish their comfortable work environments that feature all medical instruments and devices they need for their work. They also realize that they should be grateful to these underprivileged individuals who suffer from poverty and disease for affording them an opportunity to help. This manifestation of hardship enables us to fully realize what it means to be content, experience the genuine joy of participation, and grasp the true meaning of the old adage “giving is a greater blessing than receiving”.

Reports delivered by Tzu Chi chapters/foundations in different countries and regions reveal that the scope of medical care is no longer confined to medical consultation and treatment. It now also includes preventive medicine and health promotion. Health education

has turned into a vital component of community initiatives. Dissemination of health-related knowledge or health screening in the fields of dental care or prevention of chronic diseases and cancer is based on the ancient concept that “the best doctors are capable of preventing illness”. Physicians are also starting to embrace a deep commitment to dementia and long-term care. Finally, TIMA initiatives have no rigid format. Adjustments are made in accordance with actual needs of communities and care recipients.

While I went back to Taiwan in 1989, I stumbled across a booklet titled the “Tzu Chi Universe of Dharma Master Cheng Yen” in the magazine rack in the visa office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Taipei. Later on, I had a conversation with the Master in Hualien, which inspired me to join the ranks of Tzu Chi after my return to the US. The establishment of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Free Clinic (now Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Center) in Alhambra, California at the end of 1993 marks the initiation of the Tzu Chi Medical Mission in the US. When Master Cheng Yen mentioned that there was a serious shortage of physicians in

Hualien in 1995, I decided to retire early and return to Taiwan around age 50 to fully dedicate myself to the Tzu Chi Medical Mission. Over 20 years have passed by since I made this life-changing decision.

Over all these years, I have been filled with Dharma bliss every day I reside in the Tzu Chi realm as I follow the Master's enlightening teachings. In early 2022, I had a brush with death as a result of a sudden serious illness. I am deeply grateful to all members of the Tzu Chi medical team for their selfless efforts to save my life. Master Cheng Yen treasures every second and I have made an unwavering commitment to follow the Master's shining example by not wasting any second of my life.

I am a devout Buddhist and medical practitioner from Taiwan. As a Tzu Chi member, I can devote my professional skills to Buddhism, Taiwan, and medical practice. I have never regretted my decision to seize the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to follow the Master.

The Tzu Chi Medical Mission represents an extension of the Tzu Chi Charity Mission. Relief of suffering is the essence of medical care. I am

therefore deeply grateful for the valuable contributions of my TIMA partners to relieving suffering and bringing joy to people all over the world. This is the greatest motivating force for all TIMA members to persist in their efforts. I sincerely hope that this spirit of selfless contributions will continue to shine, and the Tzu Chi Medical Humanities will be upheld forever. Tzu Chi's mission must be fulfilled.

Against the backdrop of the threat of climate change and pandemics, Dharma Master Cheng Yen appeals to all sentient beings to promote vegetarianism. I have directed my efforts to the goal of providing scientific evidence for the health benefits of vegetarian diets. If all humans can be turned into vegetarians, epidemics and other disasters can be avoided and health and safety can be preserved.

Finally, I earnestly hope that the epidemic will be over soon and TIMA members will again be able to gather for the annual convention in Hualien and celebrate the Moon Festival under the beautiful full moon here in Hualien and their spiritual home.