

Why Dharma Master Cheng Yen was selected to receive the 24th Niwano Peace Prize

The founder of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, Dharma Master Cheng Yen is the head both of a small Buddhist temple in Hualien, Taiwan, and of one of the largest philanthropic organizations in the world, with over five hundred staff members. She is also the founder of the Tzu Chi Buddhist General Hospital, which is staffed by high quality medical teams, and of several educational institutions.

The Tzu Chi Foundation is a not-for-profit organization founded by Master Cheng Yen in 1966 at Pu Ming Temple on the east coast of Taiwan, where people were very poor. It began with thirty housewives who donated some of their grocery money to help others. Tzu Chi volunteers living away from Taiwan began setting up overseas chapters of the Foundation in 1985. They have used money raised locally to help the needy in their own communities. Its supporters have grown to over five million people.

Aiding victims of the typhoon in Bangladesh in 1991 was the beginning of the Foundation's international relief work. Since then the organization has sought to overcome obstacles of time, distance, culture, politics and so on to provide emergency relief and hope to victims of war, flood, drought, earthquakes, and other disasters. Now people in over fifty-seven countries have received aid from Tzu Chi. Disaster victims are also encouraged to help each other, so that they become more independent and involved in rebuilding their own communities. An ultimate goal is said to be "to inspire disaster victims to contribute to others when they have the ability to do so, thus creating a global village of Great Love."

Thus, Tsu Chi is a spiritual as well as a charitable organization. It focusses both on giving material aid to those in need and on inspiring compassion in both givers and receivers. It is active mainly in four areas: international disaster relief, a bone-marrow bank, protection of the natural environment, and community volunteer work. It understands itself as being dedicated to working in the fields of charity, medicine, education, environmental protection, the promotion of humanistic values and community volunteer work.

The organization raises small donations from many people and puts the collected money to work helping the poor or those in need of disaster relief. When poor Taiwanese housewives were making tiny donations every day, it was suggested that it might be better to make a larger donation once a month. But Master Cheng Yen said that by making a very small donation every day they would could have a compassionate thought every day, rather than only once a month.

While the mission of the organization has to do primarily with disaster relief and medical care, Master Cheng Yen feels that "lack of love for others" has been the root of many problems in this world. From the beginning Master Cheng Yen has been determined to serve all of humanity, envisioning a world of kindness, compassion, joy and equality. And, "to save the world," she says, "we must begin by transforming human hearts." The ideas and compassion of Master Cheng Yen and the work of the Tzu Chi Foundation makes a great contribution toward world peace.

There are several distinct reasons for selecting Dharma Master Cheng Yen to receive the Niwano Peace Prize:

First, she has put traditional Buddhist teachings and spirit into the practice of helping the poor in a contemporary context. The Buddhist ideal virtue is compassion, with giving as one of the Six Perfections. Raising relief funds and doing volunteer work are being reinterpreted as core spiritual practices of Mahayana Buddhism.

Master comes from a pietistic traditional Buddhist background, but she was not satisfied with traditional teachings and practices, especially with Buddhist receptivity to enduring suffering in life. She knew through personal experiences of her parents' illnesses that decent medical care was not available to the poor. In general, Buddhism tends to focus on meditative states of mind, neglecting the importance of change in the secular world. But, Master Cheng Yen felt the necessity for assisting the poor who were suffering both from medical and economic difficulties. She used skilful means to translate Buddhist teachings into every day life practice for ordinary housewives.

Second, she has made an valuable contribution by changing the traditional Buddhist association with medicine. In Buddhist tradition temples there are statues of bodhisattvas and buddhas who care for people spiritually. By providing modern "Western medicine" for the poor, Master Cheng Yen and her organizations have focused on making medical care available for the poor.

Third, she is a very charismatic woman, founding and managing one of the largest charitable organizations in the world. This movement depends on her charismatic personality and decision-making. She is an inspiration to her followers, many of whom considered her to be an incarnation of the bodhisattva Guanyin.

Fourth, she has attracted many nuns and laywomen, because she is a nun. Tzu Chi is primarily a women's organization in the sense that a large majority of its supporters are volunteer nuns and laywomen. She stands out as a very committed nun who has kept the vows of a nun and practiced traditionally respected Buddhist austerity. This virtuous personality attracts many women.

Fifth, the Tzu Chi organization is apolitical and oriented to volunteer work. We assume that this organization has become extremely successful because it utilizes a blend of modern efficient management with a voluntary spirit rooted in traditional Taiwanese Buddhist and Confucian ethos.

She and her followers maintain that Buddhism should be strictly apolitical. Such a stand may be supported by a large number of people, who often are critical of political monks and nuns. Master Cheng Yen and the Tzu Chi Foundation do not intend to use their power to gain influence over politicians and government and have no interest in government funding. Rather than emphasizing reform through structural changes in the society, she envisions the Confucian and Buddhist ideal of a virtuous society.

For these reasons, we are honored that this great woman, Dharma Master Cheng Yen, has been selected to receive the NPP this year.