

The Great Things Love Can Achieve: Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) Relief

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation

Wednesday, 22 January 2014 12:09



[[Master's Teachings](#)]

The Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) disaster in the Philippines was truly a world-shocking calamity. In intensity, it was the most powerful typhoon in history ever to make landfall. But, it was also massive in size. Given such intensity and size, it was tremendously destructive.

Just that morning, the people on those affected Philippine islands were still going about their lives full of dreams and hopes, making big, ambitious plans. With the typhoon's landfall in the early afternoon, however, suddenly the violent winds, pounding rain, and storm surge with waves several meters high devastated everything in their path. Within moments, all dreams and plans became nothing; thousands lost their lives and millions struggled to survive without power, water, or food. Just the coming of the storm changed everything. In an instant, all that people had was reduced to nothing and their future became bleak.

To be there for people in need

In Cebu, our local volunteers quickly went to the affected areas that they could reach and provided cash assistance and medical service to the survivors because they were closest to the disaster area. On the fourth day after the disaster, Tzu Chi volunteers from the Tzu Chi Philippines main office in Metro Manila arrived in the heaviest-hit disaster areas on Leyte Island to begin disaster assessment and aid distribution including free medical clinics. With transportation systems destroyed and poor weather conditions exacerbating the problem, reaching the disaster area was truly a major challenge. The normally two-hour trip by direct flight turned into a more than 20 hour journey via plane, bus, and boat.



Arriving there, the volunteers found massive destruction. Everything was reduced to debris. It was like a wasteland; looking around, there were bodies, mud, garbage, and debris everywhere, all made worse by the continued falling rain. With the severe damage, at one point, the city of Tacloban seemed as if it would be abandoned altogether as many survivors left the area to stay with relatives or friends or to move altogether to start anew elsewhere.

But while those with means could leave, where could the poor go? They have no option but to stay and try to survive right there amidst the devastation. The only way for them to recover is to start over right where they are, but they have been traumatized and debilitated by the super typhoon and the massive destruction it brought. We could see that they needed to believe in the future in order to dig themselves out of the debris and move forward in the recovery work. Knowing this, our Tzu Chi volunteers resolved to be there with the survivors in their time of greatest need and help them with recovery. One group after another, Tzu Chi volunteers from

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various countries joined our local volunteers in the Philippines to bring aid.

To relieve suffering



How to help? The survivors were in a state of deep grief and helplessness. Feeling deeply for their pain, Tzu Chi volunteers could not bear for them to continue in such a state. But turning their situation around really requires the timely application of compassion and wisdom—action has to be coupled with compassion and wisdom in order to achieve positive and lasting influence.

Therefore, the volunteers not only comforted the survivors with loving care. Given the enormous grief the survivors were grappling with, we knew it would not be easy for them to set aside their pain to engage in constructive action. We had to find a way to lift their spirits and empower them. That is why, instead of simply distributing cash aid, we launched a cleanup drive inviting survivors to clean up their community, and gave them a cash gift at the end of the day for their contribution. We wanted to help the survivors see that rebuilding is within their reach if everyone contributes and works together.

Since this program was an alternative form of relief aid, we wanted to make sure that the daily cash gift—in essence emergency cash—would be enough to be a real help to the survivors. As the price of many goods rose after the disaster, making them even less affordable for survivors who were already in hard straits, we set the daily cash gift at 500 pesos, twice the minimum daily wage. These were not normal times and survivors, having lost everything including their job and source of income, were in a particularly difficult time. They really needed this emergency cash.

Because we were not there to hire workers, but to help the survivors rise above their sense of debilitation, recover from trauma, and stand up again, our volunteers carried out the program in a very warm, caring, and respectful way. Before the cleanup, our volunteers first made announcements so people could come voluntarily. As the residents congregated, our volunteers guided them to organize themselves in lines and sit down on the ground peacefully. Speaking to them in a very gentle, respectful, and caring manner, the volunteers shared how they were bringing with them love and care from Tzu Chi volunteers across the world who were standing out on the streets, braving the winter cold and enduring the scorching heat of summer, to gather donations and pool together countless tiny contributions to aid the survivors. Our volunteers wanted the people to know that everyone is working to help them, not only the volunteers in the disaster area.

Then, our volunteers held a prayer and asked everyone to pray sincerely for their family and for all affected by this devastating disaster. With everyone concentrating their good thoughts through the prayer, the environment of peace and harmony brought a great deal of comfort to the survivors. Then, our volunteers rallied all present to work together: "Hope is right there in

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front of us. Let us all stand up and clean up the community together. We can rebuild our community!" Using methods like these, the volunteers mobilized everyone in body and spirit. Knowing that relief aid, including the emergency cash, came from countless people around the world, people who were total strangers and yet gave of themselves compassionately, the survivors were able to set aside their pain and bring forth their energy to contribute their efforts to the cleanup and recovery.

To revitalize the people and their city

On the first day, around 600 people participated in the cleanup. The second day, there were around 2,700 people taking part. On the third, more than 9,000 came, and by the fourth, it was close to 10,000 people. After that, it was more than 20,000 people every day, then over 30,000. What a scene, to have over 30,000 people working together at the same time to clean up the city! By the end of 19 days of the cleanup, the survivors had carried out more than 280,000 cleanup shifts, with 60 barangays or districts in the city cleaned and restored.



With every day's efforts and progress, the city started to recover, with traffic flowing on reopened roads and stores opening for business. From aerial footage of the area, we could see parts of the city starting to come back to life as soon as the roads were cleared. Actually, by the second day after we began the cleanup drive, already street vendors started appearing on the cleared streets to resume their business. Considering that just weeks earlier, with the massive devastation, many had felt Tacloban would become a dead city with no hope for recovery—what a miraculous transformation has been brought about through the collective efforts of the survivors. Seeing the city and its people beginning to regain their vitality and sorrowful faces transforming into bright, hopeful ones—how moving this is.

From this radical change in the city and the people, we witness how the power of love can bring truly touching results. Though clearing the debris was hard work, the survivors dedicated themselves willingly and with vigor. They weren't just motivated by the cash assistance of 500 pesos we gave them. It was the sincere love and care the Tzu Chi volunteers showed them in every detail of the program which touched and opened their hearts. Living in the disaster area, the volunteers had to cope with the same shortages of daily necessities as the survivors. But, they stayed on, just to help with disaster relief. Such selfless love really moved the survivors and made them bring out even more love and energy to work hard in cleaning up their own home and community.

Some of the participants even returned the cash aid Tzu Chi volunteers gave them and started coming every day as volunteers. They said that seeing how Tzu Chi volunteers were not local yet were doing so much to help with the recovery, they wanted to lend their efforts without getting anything for it because this was their own community. Some of them also willingly took on the responsibility of being a team leader to help with organizing the cleanup and mobilizing their neighbors.

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To rebuild better with love and hope



Within a month, the city that had once been described as a hopeless wasteland had shops reopening, commerce resuming, traffic and flow of people moving once more, and newly rebuilt homes emerging. It is very moving to see the local survivors' suffering alleviated as they move on and focus on rebuilding. Many residents told us that they had used our cash aid to buy sidings and roof coverings to rebuild their homes. We saw them going from a broken life to a life renewed with hope and bustling activity. Such a transformation was possible because living bodhisattvas had gone there to help, while in over 40 countries across five continents, many volunteers worked to support the relief effort by raising funds and sending prayers and well-wishes.

In the month after the typhoon made landfall, we seized that window of time to change the survivors' outlook from despairing to bright and hopeful, to clean up their community, and then to distribute aid money in their time of most urgent need. We sincerely hope that the disaster can quickly pass and that the sorrow and trauma will leave no trace in the survivors' hearts. This is all Tzu Chi volunteers hope for. In giving, we seek nothing—we only hope to see them revitalized and empowered to rebuild their lives. We really see this beginning to happen in the Philippines now.

After one of the strongest typhoons in history brought massive catastrophe, we see that when people bring out the wisdom and compassion of a bodhisattva—to feel others' suffering as their own and work hard to relieve it—such sincere love will set off endless cycles of kindness. As everyone brings out their love and unites in collective effort, recovery is possible even after the worst of disasters, and in fact, the community can be rebuilt even better with survivors receiving and reciprocating abundant love. Such pure, enlightened love is the seed that can give rise to boundless fruits and further seeds.

For more about Tzu Chi's aid efforts for Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda), please visit the Tzu Chi Philippines website: <http://www.tzuchi.org.ph>

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Based on Dharma Master Cheng Yen's conversations with visitors in Chinese