



# NEPAL MEDICAL MISSION

## The Experience of a Novice

**Text by Dr. Premganesha Ganaisan, Orthopedic surgeon, Malaysia**

I was and still am a very fortunate child. Brought up in a loving family - a military doctor dad, who contrary to popular belief was very jovial and teacher mum who educated and nurtured me. Despite being provided with all the luxuries, I was taught from a young age about gratitude and appreciation. I was reminded never to forget the hardships of others and that a helping hand, no matter how small, would go a long way.





**Our fantastic volunteers and medical staff (myself on extreme left).**

Fast forward 20 years, I was a junior medical officer in my hospital- Hospital Tengku Ampuan Rahimah Klang Selangor, which had the distinction of being the second busiest hospital in Malaysia. Maybe it was my extremely hectic schedule, but along the way empathy deserted me. It was “punch-in- treat patients-punch-out” 7 days a week, 365 days a year. It was during my pediatrics rotation I first encountered the Tzu Chi team. I was baffled as to who these ‘uniformed -strangers’ were-clad in an elegant blue t-shirt and white pants, they mingled with patients, attending to their

needs and always did it with a smile. From a far I admired what they did- bringing hope and cheer to those grief stricken souls. It was later thru a colleague of mine I was introduced to Sister Molee and subsequently joined Tzu Chi. I managed to squeeze in time for their free clinics on a monthly basis, and on occasion the conjoined UNHCR- Tzu Chi medical camp. Although I could not spend much time with each patient, I tried my best to treat them. Then I came across a quote by Eckhart Tolle on gratitude “Acknowledging the good that you already have in your life is the foundation for all abundance”,



**Dr. Premganesha Ganaisan treating a Nepal quake victim.**

I should be grateful for what I had and needed to learn to be more a “caregiver” than a doctor.

Upon completion of my postgraduate degree in orthopedics, I was transferred out of my home state resulting in a lesser involvement in my social work. In 2015 as I pursued my subspecialty, the world was brought to standstill upon hearing of the devastating earthquake that shook Nepal. As efficient as always, Tzu Chi promptly organized a relief team requesting for volunteers. I managed to join the ‘second team’, but only at the nick of time. My family had given their blessings. They understood it was a chance of a lifetime-

to serve and help in a time of need, but as a government surgeon there were lots of formalities. I was due to fly on a Wednesday and Monday was a public holiday in my country. Hence in a space of 1 day I literally had to run for letters of approval from my department head, hospital director, subspecialty head and National orthopedics chief. Then I had to re-schedule my “hospital oncalls” and surgical cases, followed by the loads of paperwork and finally run home to pack for 10 days!! Fortunately, I managed to organize the necessary and was ready to go in time- every effort was worth it.

I met my Malaysian team in the

airport- led by Brother Danny Lee. They gave me a briefing of how medical missions are run and the problems which can be encountered. It was a 5 hour plus journey and we arrived at Kathmandu at around 1am, and settled in by 2:30 am. Up by 5:30am the next day, following breakfast, we headed to Bhaktapur which was our centre of operations approximately 30 minutes by van. Bhaktapur was a heritage city filled with old historical buildings, and sad to say most were destroyed in the quake. After a briefing with Master- via video conferencing, we walked to our campsite. I was shocked by what greeted me. The campsite was a soccer field bordered by rubble, rubbish, a stagnant river and man-made commodes. Inside were multiple overly crowded tents with a public toilet- understandably filthy, and a small makeshift cook site. There many different contributors of tents- local and international. The tents were hot, humid, congested and had a faint odor of urine. Flies were buzzing around in the already dusty environment. Despite all this, I noticed smiles all round. They smiled at us and smiled at one another, the kids laughed as they played and the ladies chatted away as they cooked. They still remained buoyant, so admirable despite their deplorable situation.

Our medical camp was setup under 2 tents with tables, stretchers and basic

medications and dressing sets. The mornings were extremely busy, and that's being modest! We averaged 80 patients an hour- more than a patient a minute! They were a slew of complaints mostly of Upper respiratory infections, Gastroenteritis and body aches. But the entire process was neither tiring nor dull as we had delightful local volunteers, who were school goers unable to do so as schools hadn't reopened. They functioned as translators and medical assistants, but eventually became friends and "medical students"- they were so eager to learn. After lunch, incidentally made using the local produce to help local economy, we ran the clinic till about 2pm, then headed out to our "home visits". I was under the pretext that we were just providing medical aid to those unable to walk, but was completely taken aback on what I saw. I stood by and observed as translators grouped families together and gave instructions to them. I asked a senior Tzu Chi member- a neurosurgeon in Taiwan what was happening and he responded saying "now we spread hope and cheer". So I watched as all the members- regardless of stature and creed broke into song and dance, prompting and cheering the families on, and saw the joy and laughter in everyone eyes- even the Tzu Chi members. Till today I cannot forget those images- hope amongst despair, sadness momentarily dismissed by joy. It was a truly humbling



and eye-opening experience on empathy. The subsequent days were predominantly as such- through the dry heat or the pouring rains (the monsoon season was approaching). We usually headed home at about 5pm, exhausted but fulfilled.

I met numerous volunteers during my stay, of different cultures and backgrounds. They each had lovely stories to share, and some had literally devoted their lives to charity! My roommate, Dr. Fong from Singapore had years of experience and even organized his own international medical missions. Their stories taught me that with willingness and determination, small 'miracles' are performed everyday worldwide, unbeknownst to many.

On May 10th I was fortunate enough to participate in a "triple ceremony"- Mother's day, Wesak day (albeit a week late) and Buddha bathing ceremony. Joined by monks from a local monastery, local councilors and members of the public, the 2 hour ceremony gave thanks and prayed for the well-being of the Nepali population. It was my first participation (and I truly hope not my last) in this sort of event. One cannot but embrace the solemnity felt. I am Hindu but was brought with the belief that all Gods are one, and the teachings are similar- display rectitude. Similar to me, the majority of the Nepali's are Hindu, but during the ceremony, they prayed with us and took blessings from



**Dr. Premganesh Ganaisan from Malaysia, Dr. Tzu-Yong Chen from Taiwan, and Dr. Fong Poh Him(right) from Singapore, discussing a patient's X-ray film under her tent.**



**On May 10, 2015, the Tzu Chi disaster relief team is about to hold a distribution event, all volunteers devote to preparation, even doctors come to help.**

Buddha, each differing in their methods. They needed all the hope they could get and I realized this Tzu Chi ceremony provided that. Then a mass distribution of food and basic supplies ensued. Throngs of victims queued up for hours, but because of the meticulous planning and support of the local volunteers, it proceeded smoothly.

A day before I was due to leave-May 12th, Nepal was rocked by another earthquake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale. It was midday and many were at their homes (remnants of what was left). As I stood in the center of the field, scared myself (I was my first experience), there was the generalized panic- people running and screaming, all more as buildings collapsed. It lasted less than a minute, but provided significant damage- more psychological than physical. We couldn't do much besides provide medical aid.

The camp was flooded with patients- mostly with nicks and bruises and fortunately none of life-threatening nature. That earthquake took a further 800 lives apparently. That day we stayed on till about 7pm, not as medical personnel but as friends – to show our support, lend a helping hand and cheer the camp up.

I left the next morning. With a heavy heart I had to say “goodbye” to my new friends- my Tzu Chi brothers and sisters, and to the victims. Although those 7 days passed by swiftly, I had a sense of fulfillment. Not a single day had been wasted, everyday I learnt something new. I learnt aid is possible in many different ways. A helping hand, no matter how small can go a long way. I then recalled Eckhart Tolle's quote once again, saw first-hand how my Tzu Chi colleagues practiced it and realized I was learning to be a “caregiver”.