

Sri Lanka

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**Surgeries and Eyeglasses;
Thousands Able to
See a Brighter World Again**

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“I must first go to the temple and say a prayer to Tzu Chi volunteers because they have made it possible for me to see this world again!” said the 74-year-old Premalatha with joy. Premalatha was almost blind and needed help with walking. She was also dependent on others for help in her daily activities. The moment she saw light, her heart was filled with gratitude. Despite the fact that she was still in recovery after an eye surgery, she was anxious to offer her prayers to Tzu Chi volunteers. Premalatha’s good fortune was the result of a free clinic organized by Tzu Chi volunteers from Singapore and the local Sri Lankan volunteers.

Eight years after the South Asian tsunami disaster, Tzu Chi volunteers from Singapore are still continuing their service in Sri Lanka. In the morning on October 26 at around 2 a.m., 29 Tzu Chi volunteers from Singapore landed at the airport in Sri Lanka. They went straight

to the Kahawatta Base Hospital in the Ratnapura District of Sabaragamuwa Province. Four hours later, the Singaporean team met up with the local medical volunteers to prepare for a two-day free clinic.

Sri Lanka Doctors and 30 Volunteers Vowed to Abolish Cataract Disease

The main objective of this free clinic was to perform surgeries on people with cataracts; conduct eye examinations; and provide free eyeglasses to those who needed them. The local Sri Lankan doctors and medical staff were responsible for the cataract surgery. Even though there was only one surgeon, the team operated on 296 patients during this two-day clinic, restoring their vision so they can see clearly again.

“Some patients are not even aware that cataracts can be treated with a simple surgery,” said the main surgeon, Dr. Shamintha Amarathunga.

Dr. Amarathunga explained that because of the hot climate and an aging population, along with the lack of eye care, cataracts have become very prevalent here. A cataract removal surgery typically costs about 20,000 Rupees (\$160 USD), which is equivalent to three months’ salary for the average worker here. Most people are unable to afford this kind of expense



There are many people affected by cataracts in Sri Lanka; most cannot afford the expensive surgery. Photo shows cataract patients waiting in line to be examined.

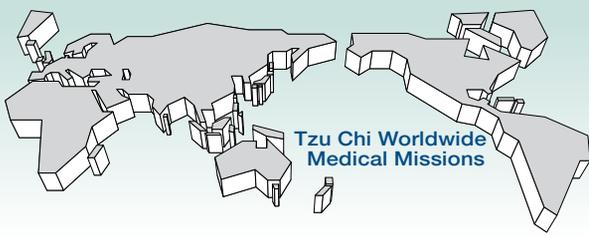
and those who are affected by cataracts often end up living with the condition with no hope in sight.

For many years, Dr. Amarathunga has been actively involved in the free eye clinic with his commitment to help treat patients with cataracts. He is also well respected locally for his kindness and has an excellent reputation as a surgeon. Three years ago, Tzu Chi held two free clinics at the Kahawatta Base Hospital. It was there that Dr. Amarathunga learned about Tzu Chi through his contact with Dr. Kapila, a Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA) volunteer, and he began to identify with Tzu Chi's principles. This time, he brought 30 of his experienced medical

staff to participate and support the free clinic event.

With advanced equipment, a skilled medical team, and the support of Tzu Chi volunteers, Dr. Amarathunga was able to complete an average of one cataract surgery every four minutes. His precision and speed shock everyone.

"When a surgical team performs efficiently, it allows me time to tend other tasks. The satisfaction I get every time from seeing a patient regaining vision after surgery is more fulfilling than money can bring. In fact, seeing the patients' joy always brings me the greatest satisfaction," said Dr. Amarathunga with a broad smile on his face.



Main Surgeon Dr. Amarathunga, along with his 30-member medical team, operated on nearly 300 patients in two days. To restore their vision is the greatest joy for the team.

Volunteer team leader Jianyi Qiu from Singapore commented, "I have heard Dr. Amarathunga vowed to treat all the people in Sri Lanka affected by cataracts. He identifies with Tzu Chi's principles and his team members share and practice the values of gratitude, respect and love when interacting with patients at the free clinic. He is an example of what Master Cheng Yen was referring to when she says 'to just act'. There are many good qualities we can learn from him."



Close to 300 Patients Regain Sight

74-year-old Grandma P.W. Premalatha has three children and lives with her unmarried son. Her son, uneducated and lacking skills, earns a meager living as a tea leaf picker. Since he could barely make ends meet, it was beyond his financial means for medical treatment for his mother. When Premalatha heard that Tzu Chi operates on patients for free, she was excited. In the morning of the 26th, with the help of her daughter Asoka, she arrived at the free clinic. After only a few minutes on the operation table, the cataract on her left eye was removed, the incision site covered with gauze. She was very relaxed and at ease as she walked out of the operating room.

When the doctor removed the gauze the following morning, Premalatha was all smiles. "I can see! I can see!" she exclaimed with joy. She then pointed at the poster on the wall and read every single word aloud. "When I go home today, I can do things that I was not able to before, like cooking, or even sewing. But before I do these things, I must first go to the temple and say a prayer to Tzu Chi volunteers because they made it possible for me to see this world again!"

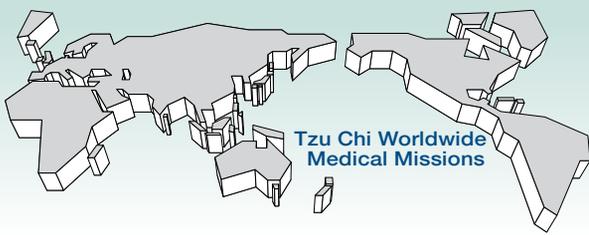
"Yesterday I could only see the



Premalatha had the cataract in her left eye successfully removed. Her daughter Asoka and Sri Lanka volunteer Kumala, help Premalatha for a return visit. She said that she now can finally do many things and also wants to say a prayer for the Tzu Chi volunteers.

color white, but now I can see many colors. I can even see the expression on everyone's face," said 70-year-old Grandma PG Pemawathi. When the gauze was removed from her eye, happiness was all over her face.

Grandma Pemawathi always felt there were spider webs in her eyes. Her vision deteriorated to a point where she could not even see her own fingers clearly. After the surgery, she was happy to see Tzu Chi volunteers and held their hands tightly. "I am thankful for Tzu Chi volunteers and doctors, may God bless you all," she said. She even made up a song herself to thank the volunteers.



Equally happy was 85-year-old Grandma Nuseena. Nuseena had cataracts in both her eyes. Her daughter Fayisa had tried to bring her for surgery some years ago but she resisted. This time, however, she agreed to the surgery and the cataract in her right eye was successfully removed. “My mom had limited vision before. We brought her here for the surgery so she could see well. We want her to have a better life,” her daughter said. Because of Nuseena’s advanced age, even if she were to go to a hospital and pay for her surgery, it is uncertain that any doctor would be willing to operate on her without first weighing the risks involved. “I truly appreciate the kindness and compassion of Tzu Chi and the doctor who was willing to operate on her and give her a chance for a better life,” she added.

Eye Exams and Eyeglasses, the World Is No Longer Blurry

During the two-day free clinic, except for cataract surgeries, eye exams and eyeglass fittings were performed by six optometrists from Singapore, along with 23 Singaporean and 50 Sri Lankan volunteers.

Before 9 a.m. in the morning of the 26th, patients started lining up at the Kahawatta Base Hospital. Stations were set for the event, including a preliminary



Volunteers kindly put on socks for patients waiting for cataract surgery.

eye exam area, an area for computerized vision testing, a work station for the optometrists and lastly, a pickup area for eyeglasses. Six Tzu Chi optometrists conducted vision tests and prescribed glasses. Their mission was to help patients to regain their eyesight.

After a full eye exam, a patient goes to the pickup area for an eye-glass. If none is available, a new pair is fabricated on site and delivered to the patient at a later date. All in all, 2,000 pairs of pre-made glasses were available for distribution at the free clinic event.

Before the start of the clinic, volunteers explained the process for eyeglasses to the local translators. In an effort to promote better interaction and cooperation between patients and volunteers, volunteer Baoyi Zeng, who



Patients gesture with their hands to show gratitude to Tzu Chi volunteers after cataract surgery.

was in charge of dispensing glasses, learned a few simple phrases in Sinhala, and wrote them down on a piece of paper. Based on the phonetics from her notes, she carefully pronounced the words in Sinhala while explaining the use for the eyeglasses, whether it was for near-sightedness or for far-sightedness. Even though her Sinhala was not easily understood by the native Sri Lankans, her cheerful personality certainly made the process fun and amusing for everyone.

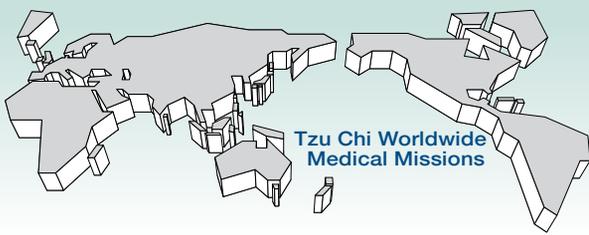
In Sri Lanka's Rathapura Province, a pair of glasses costs about 6,000 Rupees [\$45.85 USD] which is about a month's salary for an average worker. The expensive cost of glasses and the lack of eye health and general health education had resulted in poor eye care.

Shenling Cai, an optometrist and a third time participant at the Sri Lanka free clinic, indicated that while doing eye exams, she discovered many of the local residents were near-sightedness and never worn eyeglasses. The reason is economic; they can't afford glasses. An unbalanced nutrition is also a factor contributing to the high rate of aging of the eyes. "Some people are already suffering from far-sightedness at 30. This rate of aging of the eye in the local population here is faster compared that in Singapore," she added.

Ms. Leela has presbyopia (almost 500 degrees) for the last four to five years but cannot afford eyeglasses. She can only read the number when a bus stops near her. This affects her daily life. Because of the severity of her presbyopia, no pre-made glasses were available at the free clinic site so a prescription pair had to be specially ordered from an optical store. At the November eyeglass fitting ceremony, the Sri Lankan volunteers helped her put on her new pair of glasses. For Leela, the most wonderful outcome of this occasion was to be able to read her favorite Buddhist sutras again.

Root Cause of Years of Headache Discovered

65-year-old tea farmer K. Peter has difficulties with both his near and distant vision. Six years ago, he reluctantly spent



Optometrist Zhiqian Xie made the special trip from Singapore to Sri Lanka to help in eye exam.



Optometrist fitting patients with eyeglasses.

his hard-earned money on a pair of prescription eyeglasses, but as he aged, the lenses become outdated. When he heard that Tzu Chi provides free eye exams and eyeglasses, he said happily, "Since I pick tea leaves every day, the new glasses allow me to see clearly. Now I can finally say goodbye to my blurred vision."

Thirteen year-old R.A. Thisara

Madushanka contracted bacterial infection two years ago. The infection also affected his eyesight and seriously hindered his progress in school. After Tzu Chi fitted him with new eyeglasses, he was able to see clearly again. His face was beaming with happiness as he carefully stored his glasses in the box

For local resident Kanthilatha, the eye exam not only provided her with the right eyeglasses, it also found the source of her chronic headaches.

"From the beginning, she complains constant headaches. Three months of prescription painkillers did not alleviate her pain. Then the doctor asked her to have her eyes examined. After my examination, I discovered that she has severe astigmatism. No wonder she suffers from headaches. I believe wearing the new glasses will slowly decrease the frequency of the headaches," Optometrist Shenling Cai stated as she took notes for her record.

Never Forgetting to Provide Health Service

Aside from serving the local residents, the optical team members also took care of the dedicated medical staff at the Kahawatta Base Hospital by giving them free eye exams and providing them with eyeglasses if needed. Smiles could be seen on the faces of the hospital staff after

they had their eye exams.

Ranjith, who worked as a driver for the Kahawatta Base Hospital, received his first pair of eyeglasses from the free clinic. After receiving his glasses, Ranjith was happily showing them to his friends waiting in line. He even read text messages with his new glasses and gave the thumbs-up gesture to the volunteers to show them how thankful he was. Ranjith's distant vision is good but his near vision is blurred. He would often feel dizzy if he tried to read without wearing eyeglasses.

Ranjith's monthly income is about 3,000 Rupees (\$22.93USD), but a pair of glasses costs approximately 4,000 Rupees (\$30.53USD). In order to pay for his eyeglasses, he would have to go without food for a month. Ranjith is very grateful that Tzu Chi provided him with a free pair of glasses that let him see better now. He also praised Tzu Chi for helping so many others like him who otherwise would not have been able to afford their eyeglasses. Tzu Chi volunteers' act of kindness had greatly improved their lives.

However, not every health problem can be resolved by a doctor's visit or with a new pair of eyeglasses. While doing eye examinations, the optometrist should also pay attention to other health issues that might also affect the patient's vision. Volunteers used the opportunity health education such as diabetes that could

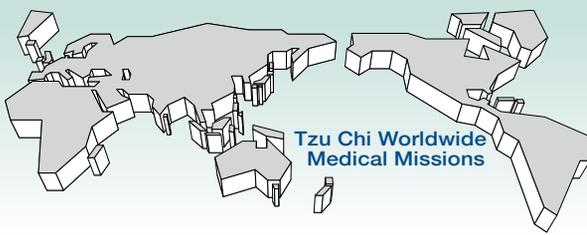


Thirteen-year-old Thisara happily wears his new pair of glasses.



Ranjith, who works at the Base Hospital at Kahawatta, picks up his new pair of eyeglasses from Tzu Chi and gives a thumb-up gesture to the volunteers.

also lead to deteriorating vision. Zhiqian Lu, an optometrist participating at the clinic, also emphasized the importance of providing basic eye health education to the public. "Taking steps to promote eye health education in Sri Lanka is something crucial and not something to be delayed," he added.



Local Media Moved by Free Clinic

As early as September, members of the Sri Lankan medical team and volunteers had already started to prepare for the free clinic. They held three cataract screenings, conducted eye examinations and prepared 400 pairs of prescription eyeglasses. On October 27, the second day of the free clinic, team members made a special trip to Ehaliyagoda Base Hospital, about an hour and a half away to deliver the 400 pairs of eyeglasses to be given away during the special ceremony to patients.

A pair of glasses represents a lifetime

of hope. “Tzu Chi’s act of kindness allows many poor local people to regain their vision,” wrote M.B. Upali Premathilake, a reporter with The Island newspaper.

The Island, an English language publication and Divaina, a Sinhala language publication, are two prominent newspapers in Sri Lanka. A few months ago, when Mr. Upali heard that a charity organization was giving out free eyeglasses in Sri Lanka, he was curious and wanted to learn more about it so he attended the eyeglasses distribution ceremony on October 27. He said, “There are many low income families who can’t afford eyeglasses. Tzu Chi’s free clinic helped many people. I hope that through



At the eyeglasses distribution ceremony, Sri Lanka volunteers respectfully deliver them to the patients.

my news report more people would come to know about Tzu Chi Organization.”

54-year-old R.A. Kusumawathi had been battling with joints disease for a long time. She had also been taking the medicine prescribed for her condition for more than 20 years. The side effects of the medication caused her vision loss which in turns affected her daily life. With her new pair of eyeglasses, she can now see things clearly. She could even read the Tzu Chi Aphorism booklet given to her by the volunteers.

“Tzu Chi volunteers say that helping others is what they do. What they refer to as ‘a small matter’ is in fact a major event in my life because it changed my future. I am so thankful for what Tzu Chi has done for me,” Kusumawathi said amid tears.

The two-day free clinic was a big success. The Singaporean team members had brought with them not only their medical expertise but also the invaluable experience gained from their participation in prior free clinics held in Sri Lanka. To prepare for the event, 50 local volunteers from Colombo had to carry out all the necessary preparations such as preoperative screening and evaluation, site planning, contacts with local health officials, and marketing to the public. They also helped to make sure that everything ran smoothly during the clinic. They are to be commended for taking on this responsibility independently for the first



Kusumawathi is happy that she can see clearly after wearing her new pair of eyeglasses.

time as a local Tzu Chi team.

Over the course of two days, Tzu Chi volunteers performed eye exams on a total of 482 people and gave out 435 pairs of eyeglasses. In addition, 309 pairs were special ordered and 400 pairs were issued previously. The combined total of all eyeglasses distributed was 1,144 pairs. These eyeglasses helped more than 1,000 people to have clear vision at last.

Tzu Chi volunteers have brought hope to many people who can now see clearly again. The love and care of Tzu Chi volunteers for the people of Sri Lanka will continue to spread and be felt for a very long time.