

Two years ago, head of La (Leaf) Pagoda in HCM City, Buddhist monk Thich Nhuan Tam, set up free l

Inner Sanctum: What inspired you to give free classes for students from poor families?

I find there is an urgent need for young Vietnamese to learn foreign languages, especially in the context of international integration.

I come from a poor family so I understand the situation of many poor students who mostly from provinces, are struggling to survive in HCM City, which is becoming increasingly expensive. It's almost impossible for them to afford school fees at foreign-language centres here.

I had been thinking of opening such classes for years, but was only able to do it in the last three years. Many students have benefited.

The most vital aspect of learning a foreign language is to help learners absorb the best knowledge that can be offered by other countries, which can then be applied to our country's development.

Inner Sanctum: Can you tell us about the classes?

We opened the class in 2010. At first, there was only one English class with only 30 children living in the neighbourhood.

However, the number of students from around the city and other provinces who yearn to enroll in such classes has increased significantly. It has pushed us to increase the number of classes to meet the demand.

Today, there are nearly 40 classes in English, French, Chinese, Japanese and German. Each 90-minute class usually meets two times a week.

Classes during the weekend are especially crowded. Sometimes, students have to stand outside the class.

All the students study seriously. They find the class interesting because of the warm and welcoming attitude of the monks and teachers here.

In addition to foreign languages taught by teachers, I also share with students many practical lessons so they can improve their soft skills.

Through the classes, I find that many students are hard-working and intelligent. So we encourage them by giving scholarships if they perform well.

Inner Sanctum: Can you describe the teachers?

Currently, we have about 35 teachers, most of whom have master's or bachelor's degrees. They teach foreign languages at universities or at foreign-language centres in the city. Some of them are overseas Vietnamese who have been teaching abroad for many years.

We also invite foreign teachers including American, Japanese and Indian to teach the students.

All the teachers are experienced and enthusiastic and have a great passion for teaching.

Most of them have a great heart for teaching without thinking of salaries. But we offer them VND2 million (US$100) each as a goodwill gesture for their contributions. I know their service is much more precious than what we can offer.

However, many of them consider teaching poor students as charity work, and have refused to accept allowances from the pagoda.

We spend about VND45 million ($2,200) to pay the teachers. The money comes mainly from public donations to the pagoda.

To help maintain the classes, I also take on calligraphy work to contribute to the income of the pagoda. Many kind-hearted people, including overseas Vietnamese, began to financially support the pagoda after hearing about the classes.

Inner Sanctum: What are your most serious challenges at the moment?

Word has spread far, so the number of students who have found out about the classes through their friends, relatives and others online has increased rapidly. The number of students is reaching 2,000, but we only have two rooms for the classes, about 30sq.m each.

The rooms are too small to accommodate 40 students. The English-language classes are the most crowded, with 50 students in each class. The schedule is tight, from 7am to 10:30pm.

I have just bought a 50.sq m plot of land next to the pagoda. I plan to build a two-storey house on the land so we can accommodate more students.

We are also seeking more donors to make contributions to the pagoda to maintain the classes.

I*nner Sanctum: What are your future plans?*

We're working with the city's Department of Education and Training to set up a free foreign-language centre that can grant certificates to the students.

Currenty, all the students study at the pagoda and then take exams at authorised centres to get certificates. But the department said it would help us set up a centre for poor students nationwide that would have the authority to grant certificates.

We also have plans to create a job-support programme to help students find employment after graduation and part-time jobs while they are still attending school. Many students have jobs now, thanks to recommendations from the pagoda.

We also plan to organise cultural activities to raise money to assist the disadvantaged and to open a free drug-rehabilitation centre in the central region.

Of course, it takes time to achieve all these plans, but I'm confident that we can do it all as long as we have the heart.

We have organised a fund-raising trip to the central province of Quang Nam with the participation of many of the students here. This was one of the lessons we wanted to offer them. — VNS

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