

A Piece of Bread

With a nervous heart, I stepped off the bus. I was standing in front of an elementary school in Cambodia, ready for my first day as a volunteer English teacher. One simple fear kept troubling my mind: Would they accept me?

But instead of the silence, I was greeted by laughter and smiles. Within moments, children came running toward me. They eagerly took my hands and excitedly led me to their classroom.

As I followed the children, I was suddenly hit by the harsh reality. The school was very different from those in Japan—crumbling walls, no air conditioners, and chalk shorter than my fingernail. There, most children suffered from poverty. For a moment, I felt as if I had stepped into a picture from a textbook.

Looking back, I am a little ashamed to admit this: I felt a subtle sense of superiority for helping children in need. Unconsciously, I had drawn a line: I was the giver, and they were the receivers. But I was soon proven wrong.

One day, I was sitting on a bench during a break when a small girl came up to me. She looked no older than six. Her arms and legs were thin and looked fragile.

She was holding a small piece of bread. She didn't say a word. She simply held the bread out toward me with both hands.

I froze. Why was she giving this to me?

I stared at the bread, my mind racing. As a volunteer, I was the one who was supposed to give. The food must be precious to her. How could I accept something from a child who had so little? Returning it felt responsible yet rejecting it felt cruel.

I looked at her and asked with a worried expression, "Are you sure?"

I gently tried to give it back. But she placed it firmly into my hand again. I hesitated before finally taking a bite. It was a plain piece of bread with margarine inside—nothing like the soft, rich pastries back home in Japan. Yet, it tasted warmer and richer than anything I had ever had, and a genuine smile spread across my face.

The girl smiled too. Then she walked away, looking satisfied.

In that moment, my perspective completely shattered.

That girl did not see me as a superior savior from a wealthy nation. She simply saw me as a person—a friend—and wanted to share her happiness. Until then, I had let my self-centered idea of "helping" create a wall between us. But her small gesture tore that wall down.

This experience transformed my definition of volunteering. I realized that true volunteering is not about "helping from above" it is about reaching out to each other as equals beyond background, or nationality. Now, I want to turn that lesson into action, to become someone who not only reaches across the sides but inspires others to do the same.

That small piece of bread wasn't just a gift—it was the bridge that brought us together.