

The Story of Dharma Master Yin Shun

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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Whenever people speak about Buddhist philosophy, the name Master Yin Shun often pops into their minds. His numerous writings have restored the fundamental meaning of Buddhism and, at the same time, opened up a new dimension for people today to investigate the Buddhist doctrines built up over the last couple of millennia. Now aged ninety-seven, the old master has been dubbed "The Gem of the Buddhist Land" or simply "The Mentor" by most Buddhists on Taiwan.

On March 12, 1906, Chang Lu-ching was born prematurely in a little village in Zhejiang Province, China, near Shanghai. On the eleventh day after his birth, a critical illness nearly snatched this feeble life from the world. Who would have guessed that this weak infant would later become a leading mentor of Buddhism?

Birth of a writer

The end of the last Chinese dynasty, the Manchu Dynasty, was a turbulent period. Revolutionary movements ended the imperial governments that had lasted for thousands of years. After the first day of January 1911, men cut off their braids and women abandoned the inhumane practice of foot-binding. Without any notice, Chang's father suddenly snipped off the boy's braids one day. Shocked and unaccustomed to short hair, the seven-year-old Lu-ching howled in protest. His father then took him to a neighboring town to receive his preliminary education.

Four years later, Chang left home to attend a boarding school for three years. Not knowing how to take care of himself and feeling inferior to other wealthy children, he was very lonely. He isolated himself and shied away from speaking with other boys.

It was his composition class that rebuilt his confidence. In his last year of middle school, the composition teacher gave him full marks plus an extra two points on an essay he wrote. The extraordinary top marks, like sunlight, illuminated his gloomy, depressed life. Through this newly discovered talent, Chang could comfortably express his thoughts. He later devoted his life to philosophic and religious writings.

Quest for the Truth

Life took another turn after Chang graduated from middle school. His father encouraged him to study medicine. If his schooling had equipped him with his writing skill, then his medical studies accidentally awakened his otherworldly pursuits. Through his studies, he stumbled across books on immortality and was deeply intrigued. He fervently read many books on the subject and even planned to look for various kinds of deities. Before he could dedicate much time to this new arena, his parents realized there was something inappropriate going on and decided to put him back on track by requiring him to teach at primary schools.

Then Chang turned his attention to Taoist philosophy and Confucianism. Yet neither could quench his thirst for the Truth. He desperately needed an answer to fill the growing emptiness in

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his heart.

Christianity, which spoke of faith, hope and love, sparked a light within his heart. Its societal characteristic of loving others as you would yourself appealed to him. He devoured the Old and New Testaments and read Christian periodicals. He prayed and even attended revivals. However, after two years, Chang was still unable to fully commit himself to Christianity. The light that once lit his heart had started to dim.

The sense of emptiness again descended upon him. Deeply depressed and perplexed, he read anything he could get his hands on to kill the time. Amidst his aimless reading, he stumbled upon the words, "the Buddha's teachings." His heart leapt upon reading this phrase. He began zealously searching for books on Buddhism. He was twenty years old then.

As a neophyte, it was naturally difficult for him to understand the profound meaning that these books tried to convey. But his failure to understand the Buddha's thoughts propelled him to work harder to perceive the essence of Buddhism. "I was like a child, fascinated by all the interesting activities done by adults, trying to figure out what was going on," he later reminisced. "Partially aware and partially bewildered, I came to realize how boundless the depths of Buddhism could be."

Chang knew that Buddhism was his refuge. The empty place in his heart was filled. Through his studies, he progressed steadfastly on his selected path.

In the spring of 1928, Chang's mother suddenly died after having been ill for only four days. In the autumn, his granduncle, who lived with their family, passed away, and his father died the following June. Overwhelmed with providing care and medicine and then managing funerals for his loved ones, Chang was upset with the suffering and misery that life had brought him. "What could I ever get out of leading such a busy life?" Depressed and melancholy, he resolved to become a monk in order to acquire peace of mind.

There was no one in his family who needed his care now. He was free to do whatever he wanted to do. One big question had all his attention: Why was there such a drastic discrepancy between the Buddhist doctrines that he read about in books and the actual practice of Buddhism in real life? He yearned to dedicate his whole life to unraveling this mystery. His mind was set on finding places where Buddhism was still practiced the way it should be. He aspired to be a monk who could expounded the authentic meaning of Buddhism.

The reality of Buddhist practices outside his village was unknown to this young man in the countryside. Not knowing exactly what might come his way, he bravely strode forward into the darkness of uncertainty.

At that moment, a light was switched on for him.

Winding road to Buddhism

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"Beijing Bodhi School Recruits New Students!" An advertisement printed in a local newspaper in June 1930 drew Chang's attention. The wonderful news was like a beam from a lighthouse showing him the right direction in life's journey. The entrance exam consisted of an essay to be written and mailed in to the school. Chang's essay was entitled *The Buddha's Teachings Are Aimed at Eradicating Suffering and Obtaining Joy*. The reply from the school came a few days later: "You passed the exam and are admitted to our school." But then the notification for the school commencement never appeared in the paper. The longer he waited, the more anxious he became. Unable to bear the torment of waiting any longer, he decided to go to Beijing to see for himself.

Chang's determination to pursue the Buddha's teachings was firmly set. On June 29, 1930, at the age of twenty-five, he left home alone for the first time and renounced his worldly life for good. Traveling night and day from Shanghai, he finally reached Beijing. There he found out that the school had been shut down due to military confrontations among warlords. Although his high hopes were shattered, his zeal was not dampened. After pondering for a while, he could do nothing but return to Shanghai.

"Where should I go next?" Chang asked in bewilderment. In a little inn in hustling, bustling Shanghai, Chang sat alone. A few days passed as he killed time by browsing through some of the Buddhist sutras that he carried. Suddenly, out of nowhere, the name "Tien Tung Temple" flashed through his mind. Seizing the thought, he boarded a boat sailing toward Ningpo. To his dismay, he was told by the locals upon his arrival there that the temple could not be reached by means of rickshaws, a commonly used means of transportation then. His hope seemed to diminish quickly.

"Pu Tou Mountain [one of the four sacred Buddhist mountains in China] is not far away," he thought. "Why don't I simply go over there to pay homage to the Buddha?" As the boat rolled on a sea dotted with hundreds of islands, Chang was finally getting closer to the buddha-land.

He lodged in a temple on Pu Tou Mountain. One day, a young man walked by and caught a glimpse of the sutra that Chang was reading. "My name is Wang, and I'm here to be ordained as a monk," he amicably introduced himself. "I want to be a monk too," Chang exclaimed. It was the first time that Chang had shared with anyone else his secret desire of becoming a monk. The stranger standing before him soon became his close friend.

The two of them thoroughly scrutinized *The Guide to Pu Tou Mountain* for a place where they could wholeheartedly study the Buddha's teachings. "The Prajna Abode has a rich collection of sutras and is headed by a well-cultivated abbot." Upon reading that, they felt that it was the place where they should go.

The abode was a little hut. After they knocked at the door several times, an old monk finally came to the door. "We want to study Buddhism," the two of them said bluntly. Sensing their sincerity and aspiration to learn, the old monk briefly expounded the essence of Buddhism for them. His voice was stern but serene.

"Many pilgrims visited the temple where we were staying, so we hope to move to a quiet place

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for a couple of months where we can study the fundamental thoughts of Buddhism," Chang explained.

The old monk nodded with understanding. "I see. There is a Fu Chun Monastery located less than half a mile from here. Just tell them that it is I who referred you to them!"

After thanking the monk, the two hurried to Fu Chun Monastery. There, the abbot, with his gray hair and beard glowing under the sun, looked extremely dignified and holy. After listening to their explanation, he nodded in agreement.

Together, Chang and Wang stayed at the monastery and began to delve into the Buddha's teachings. Finally, the drifting seed had settled on the buddha-land.

Master Ching Nen, the abbot of the monastery, made that seed sprout. On October 11, 1930, the old master shaved Chang Lu-ching's head and gave him the religious name of Yin Shun, the monk who would later give new light to Chinese Buddhism through his writings.

Decline of Buddhism

In his vast reading, Master Yin Shun came upon the Agama Sutra, the first Buddhist scripture compiled by the Buddha's disciples. Although the scripture records events that happened 2,500 years ago, it brims with a strong sense of genuineness and tangibility. The young monk could still vividly hear the dialogue between the Buddha and his disciples.



At the same time, Yin Shun noticed that Buddhism in China was waning. The Buddhist scriptures, the lectures and teachings of the Buddha ought to be studied, understood, and above all practiced in daily life by Buddhists. But in China, the scriptures were nothing more than chanting materials for funerals. In his hometown, monks only chanted sutras for the dead, while their major duty of expounding the Buddha's teachings to those who were still alive was completely ignored. In the end, the lifestyles of the monks did not differ much from those of laypeople. The stunning discrepancy between the Buddhist doctrines and the real-life decadence, decline and lack of dedication of the contemporary Buddhist sangha [the congregation of monks] worried young Yin Shun deeply. He, too, was overwhelmed with questions and doubts.

Furthermore, ruthless criticism and reprimands could be heard in society. "Buddhism ruins the country." "Monks and nuns are useless." "Abolish monasteries." Derogatory slogans like these were shouted almost every day by some educated people.

Liang Su-ming, a famous scholar who was once a devoted Buddhist, concluded that Buddhism was totally inapplicable to real life. He felt that Buddhism was too abstract. It spoke of the vast

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time span from the past to the future, the space of the

Ten Directions, and the living beings in the Six Realms. Yet it failed to shed light on "this very moment, this very place and this very person."

Liang's pragmatic critique made a strong impact on Yin Shun. Was it true that the Buddha's teachings had become useless in dealing with people and events in our lives? Yin Shun felt that Buddhism seemed to have been transformed into a fragile kite flying in the sky of 2,500 years ago: it could easily be blown away in a gust of wind. "Does the Buddha only exist in a heaven that is beyond the reach of people?" Yin Shun wondered.

Seeing the Buddha

The Agama Sutra sat silently on his desk. A line caught the young monk's eyes: "All buddhas arise in the human world; no one achieves buddhahood in heaven." With that verse, all doubts hanging in his mind evaporated. At last, he found the answer to his question. Tears of joy rolled uncontrollably down his cheeks.

He finally saw the buddhas--they actually existed in the world!



In 1941, at age thirty-six, Master Yin Shun so described the Buddha in *The Buddha in the World*:

"His footsteps covered the two shores of the Ganges River. How could one say that he passively renounced the worldly life and abandoned his fellow human beings? In order to find the Truth and attain genuine emancipation, he led an austere and simple life. He had to endure all sorts of slander and even assassination attempts, and still remain composed and compassionate. Why did he do all these things? Did he lead a more pessimistic life than the kings of his era? All in all, he renounced his comfortable worldly life in order to end the suffering in the world, to find liberation for people, and to elevate human beings. Through all this, he had no ego or any selfish aims."

The Buddha lived not in seclusion, but among people. Every day he walked barefooted to villages to beg for food. When he met a farmer, he used examples from farming to talk about the meaning of life. No matter who he met--a butcher, a prostitute, a bandit, a slave, a scholar, or a child--he would talk to them, according to their temperament and intellectual faculty, to inspire them a little and alleviate their suffering.

How did a man named Siddhartha become an Enlightened One? By realizing the truth of life and cultivating himself in the human world, he understood the Principle of Causes and Conditions. All existence and phenomena arise because of the coincidence of causes and conditions. As these causes and conditions change, all things correspondingly cease to exist.

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With such an understanding, Siddhartha attained the buddhahood.

However, most people are blind to the Truth and hence become entangled in the cycle of reincarnation by creating bad karma for themselves. Yin Shun concluded: "If we can observe with wisdom, we will see the impermanent nature of all things. We can then eradicate our worries and perplexity by eliminating our attachments and the bad habit of making distinctions. Once we can do that, our minds will be as composed and wise as that of the Buddha."

From the verse "All buddhas arise in the human world; no one achieves buddhahood in heaven," the concept of humanized Buddhism sprang up. Master Yin Shun pointed out that buddhahood is attainable if one cultivates the three courses--faith, compassion and wisdom--practiced by all bodhisattvas. All Buddhists must have faith in the existence of supreme enlightenment and believe that each of us can attain it if we work hard enough. They also need to cultivate compassion by redeeming all living beings from their suffering and giving them joy. Last but not least, they need to cultivate supreme wisdom by helping others without asking for anything in return.

Ever since then, Master Yin Shun has endeavored to promote the idea of humanized Buddhism in China through his lectures, speeches and writings. He has successfully turned the attention of Buddhists from otherworldly affairs to the well-being of living people.

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My heart will never change

The civil war between the Nationalist and Communist armies took Master Yin Shun to Hong Kong in 1949, and then three years later to Taiwan, where he has resided ever since.



The master values education because he believes faith in Buddhism should be developed from Right View--only with a correct understanding of the Buddha's teachings will one's faith in the Triple Treasures [the Buddha, dharma and sangha] be genuine. Such a devout faith will lead one unswervingly to bring benefits to oneself and others and further one's progress on the Path of the Buddhahood. In the 1950s, the master observed that the Buddhist monks and nuns in Taiwan, just like those in his hometown, seemed to be only concerned about performing rituals, and not educating other monks, nuns or laypeople with the Buddha's philosophy. Worried about this unfavorable situation, Yin Shun decided to reverse the trend. The society, including the Buddhist sangha, of that time saw women as inferior to men. Women had few chances to receive an education. Inspired by Master Yin Shun's belief that studies would enhance a nun's spiritual growth, Master Shuan Shen opened the Hsinchu Women's Buddhist Institute in her convent. In addition, Master Yin Shun set up the first Buddhist lecture hall on the island--the Hui Jih Lecture Hall. Through lectures and discussion, attendees were encouraged to study the orthodox Buddhist teachings. His efforts paid off. Quite a few Buddhists have learned to behave

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properly according to the Buddha's teachings.

Wherever he went, no matter how frail he was, he always promulgated humanized Buddhism. In November 1954, a checkup revealed that the master had long been inflicted with pulmonary tuberculosis. His lungs were calcified and the tracheae were abnormal. He needed to receive immediate medical treatment and get adequate rest. Still, he had to fly to the Philippines to give a series of lectures. When he finally returned to Taiwan, five months had passed. The trip took a heavy toll on his health. He barely had the strength to eat or talk. However, when people came to him with questions on Buddhism, he would summon his strength and answer spiritedly.

In 1999, another life-threatening illness befell him. Because of months of incessant diarrhea, the signs of life were fading from the 94-year-old Mentor of Buddhism. Such pain and fatigue would be unbearable to any robust youth, let alone a man of his age. Yet never once did Yin Shun panic or complain. Dr. Lin, his attending physician, said the master always greeted all visitors with a smile. Whenever guests came to visit the venerable master, he summoned up his spirit to speak to them. "As a physician, I knew he was clenching his teeth to endure the pain and the fatigue and the numbness from sitting, because he didn't want to frighten away his visitors," Dr. Lin said. "I think this could hardly be achieved unless a person has attained a very high level in his spiritual cultivation." The master again set a good example for his disciples to follow.

In Authentic Human Buddhism, Master Yin Shun described himself as follows:

"True, I have done a lot of research on the Buddha's teachings, and I have written some and talked some about Buddhism. But I am neither a sectarian, a theoretician, nor an erudite Buddhist scholar. Much less do I intend to open a dharma department store that gives you whatever you need (like an accomplished bodhisattva who can give whatever you ask for). I am only receiving and forming theories to prove the concept of my own teacher, the Venerable Master Tai Shu, that Buddhism is not about worshipping ghosts or deities, but about putting the Buddha's teachings into practice in our daily lives. Although my body is fading away with age, my mind will forever dwell joyfully on the Buddha's teachings. I am committed to being reborn in this world [not in heaven] again and again to be a messenger of the Buddha."

"Humanized Buddhism is the core of Buddhism," Master Yin Shun reiterated. His efforts in promoting this idea have yielded fruit. Some of his eminent disciples have gone out into the world to serve all living beings with an otherworldly spirit--Cheng Yen founded the Tzu Chi Foundation, Chuan Tao is raising public awareness on the environment, Chao Hui is promoting the integrity of all lives, etc. All this originated from the day Master Yin Shun started to promote humanized Buddhism over sixty years ago.

By Pan Shuen

Translated by Teresa Chang and Adrian Yiu
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