

## A Mentor to Us All

Written by Liu King-pong

Sunday, 11 September 2005 00:00

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"Whether he was sleeping or awake, the Mentor always wore a smile," recalls Master Cheng Yen. "Even when he was hospitalized, he responded to everyone with a warm smile. When asked if he felt any discomfort from his ailments, he always replied, 'No, nothing!'"

Master Yin Shun, known simply as "the Mentor" or "Grandmaster" to millions of Tzu Chi members around the world, passed away at the age of 100 on June 6, 2005. "It was truly extraordinary for him to remain so unencumbered and serene even as his illness worsened," Master Cheng Yen continued. "He seemed to be entering a higher level of subconscious joy. The Mentor experienced no signs of physical anguish while passing through the tunnel between life and death. He just slowly and quietly slipped into a deep sleep."

The Mentor was born in 1906 in Zhejiang Province, China, where his father managed a grocery store. Unfortunately, ailments prevented his mother from producing an adequate supply of breast milk. As a result, the Mentor was physically feeble throughout most of his long life. Even during his younger years, his emaciated features often led others to mistake him for a much older man. While teaching and serving as a mentor at the Dharma King Institute in Sichuan Province in 1941, a colleague once asked, "Hey Mentor, you're about 60 years old, aren't you?" The Mentor, only 38 at the time, replied with a wry, embarrassed smile, "Oh, yes, I'm, uh, getting there..." Who would have predicted that this thin, pallid man would one day become a symbol of longevity and erudition for Buddhists everywhere?

Buddhism was first introduced into China from India around ad 70, during the Han Dynasty. Under the emperor's supervision, the Buddha's teachings were translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by erudite monks and scholars and compiled into the Great Treasury Sutra. Unfortunately, these scriptures were written in an arcane classical Chinese script that made them extremely difficult for most people to comprehend. Fortunately, Master Yin Shun's profound understanding of classical Chinese allowed him to comprehend the essence of the Buddha's philosophy as conveyed in the Great Treasury Sutra. He then systematically explained the scriptures in a 24-volume treatise, the Wonderful Cloud Anthology. This major scholarly achievement had a significant impact in academic circles in Taiwan and Chinese Buddhism in general.

Traditionally, Chinese monks and nuns had long approached the practice of Buddhism from one of two polarized perspectives. The first was to cultivate their own spirituality while living in the mountains, separated from society. The second was to use the religion to earn a living by holding Buddhist rituals, especially those for the dead. The Mentor, however, took it upon himself to remind Buddhists everywhere of the importance of putting the Buddha's teachings into practice on a daily basis--"to humanize Buddhism and bring bodhisattvas into this world." He promoted the Middle Observation of Buddhism, which explains that everything comes and goes according to the convergence and divergence of conditions.

This understanding of the true nature of Buddhism has been adopted by Master Cheng Yen and

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her millions of followers throughout the world and has kindled a revolutionary Buddhist movement in Taiwan. The Mentor's great works have also helped motivate more Buddhist scholars, many of whom had previously despised the passivity and non-productivity of the "traditional" practice of Buddhism. Through the efforts of Master Yin Shun, Buddhism is no longer a religion that only serves the deceased; it has become a popular belief upheld by the elite of society.

Normally, the holy name of Amitabha, the buddha who rules over the Western World of Ultimate Happiness, is chanted for the deceased. However, the Mentor requested instead that the holy name of Sakyamuni be recited after his death. Sakyamuni is the buddha that symbolizes the world that we live in now. In other words, the Mentor wanted to show that he desired to be reborn into a world full of suffering and hardship, rather than enter a world of eternal happiness, so that he could continue promoting the Right Thought of the Buddha in the place where it is most needed. This dignified and unselfish request explains why he will forever be a Mentor to us all.

Source: Tzu Chi Quarterly Fall 2005