

The Origin of Tzu Chi

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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Master Yin Shun was 58 years old and Master Cheng Yen was 26 when they first met at Huiyi Lecture Hall. The Mentor's first impression of Master Cheng Yen was that she was skinny, petite, and introverted. After listening to Hui Yin's explanation, the Mentor understood better the background of the novice who had shaved her own head. As he would recall: "She was determined to leave home and become a nun, but she wasn't aware of the rule and so she traveled to Taipei alone. She didn't come to the lecture hall to meet me, but rather to buy Master Tai Xu's books. That was something rare, so I had a good feeling about her from the onset and therefore decided to help her."

When Master Cheng Yen took refuge with Master Yin Shun, she took to heart the instruction that he so easily gave her. "My master wanted me to be committed to Buddhism and all living beings in order to raise the quality of Buddhism. When I first heard his words, I felt completely overwhelmed as Buddhism was not very popular in mainstream society in Taiwan at that time. It was indeed a very difficult mission and a heavy responsibility."

At that time, people regarded Buddhism as being similar to Taoism, little more than superstitious attempts to cultivate supernatural powers. Followers mainly concerned themselves with avoiding bad luck and selfishly gaining personal merit without regard for anyone else. However, Master Cheng Yen believed that the responsibility of Buddhism was to meet the needs of society. The religion would be of no help to anyone if it ignored major social concerns or became abstruse and esoteric. Therefore, the Master focused her thoughts on how she could promote Buddhism in a way that would make it truly popular among the public.

The chance appeared in 1966. The Master had been a nun for three years and was carrying out her spiritual cultivation with five disciples in a tiny wooden hut behind Puming Temple in Hualien. The Mentor was hired to teach at the Chinese Culture College near Taipei, and he wanted Master Cheng Yen to move to Miaoyun Lanruo, a Buddhist school he had set up in Chiayi, southern Taiwan.

Master Cheng Yen recalled the event. "The place where my disciples and I were staying was very crude, and we had no income whatsoever. My kind master wanted us to move to Miaoyun Lanruo because there was a piece of farmland where we could plant crops."

However, a group of housewives did not want Master Cheng Yen to move away from Hualien. They wrote a petition to Master Yin Shun, asking him to postpone the transfer for three years.

As fate would have it, around that time three Catholic nuns came to visit Master Cheng Yen. They shared a wonderful conversation about life and religion, and Master Cheng Yen gained a vital insight. The three nuns agreed that Buddhism was to be held in very high regard and recognized that there were far more Buddhists than Christians in Asia. However, they also pointed out that Buddhists, especially those in Hualien, were not organized in such a way as to help other people.

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"I was overwhelmed by the impact of the conversation that I had with those three Catholic nuns. I couldn't eat my lunch. I kept thinking about what I should do to turn the intangible Buddhist spirit into a tangible one."

What sprang forth from this inspirational conversation was the initial idea of Tzu Chi. The Master started to formulate a plan and told her disciples, "Now I want to try something new. If it is successful, I won't leave Hualien..."

The Master decided to set up the Tzu Chi Foundation to help the poor and the sick. The mission started with the 30 housewives who had petitioned to Master Yin Shun.

Support for spirit and action

In an interview with Tzu Chi TV in February 2003, the Mentor recalled his reaction when he heard Master Cheng Yen's initial plan to build a hospital. "Establishing a charity foundation and building a hospital were great deeds, since they would make people respect Buddhism, I highly praised Master Cheng Yen. However, she was still so young, like a little kid, and it wouldn't be easy for her to shoulder such a heavy load. Her goal was enormous and it wasn't going to be easy to make it happen. I believed that it would be better not to start at all than to fail halfway. I told her this before she started her mission in the hope that she would think it through clearly instead of acting on impulse."

Although the Mentor was concerned about Master Cheng Yen, he still showed his support with concrete action.

Tzu Chi had no office in Taipei in the early days, so each month it used the Mentor's Huiji Lecture Hall as a distribution point from which to help needy families. It was held at this same location for 18 years, from 1973 to 1991. Following the construction of the Hualien Tzu Chi Medical Center in 1979, the Mentor continued to show his solid support and encouragement. He often provided monetary donations that he had received as either birthday presents or as offerings from disciples or other people. The Mentor was always the first to respond to Tzu Chi's relief work with donations or public appeals, such as those for the September 21 earthquake relief work, the candlelight vigil following the September 11 suicide attacks in the United States, and the most recent relief work helping tsunami survivors in South Asia. He hoped that if he himself set a good example, his followers would follow suit.

Kind reminder and wise expectation

After the Mentor turned 94, he started spending more time at the Abode of Still Thoughts, where Master Cheng Yen lives. Master Cheng Yen could therefore visit him more easily.



On December 7, 2001, Master Cheng Yen went to the third floor to visit her old mentor. The Abode was preparing 800,000 red envelopes for the attendees of the year-end ceremonies [the Master often gives each of her disciples a red envelope with a little present inside at the end of

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every year as a token of her appreciation]. Master Cheng Yen and her old master chatted away while folding the red envelopes. Master Yin Shun spoke about Xiashi, his hometown in China: "Xiashi, on the northern bank of the Qiantang River near the East China Sea, produced a lot of salt; even the drinking water was salty. Local people also raised silkworms."

As the hours passed, they sat together and continued to fold red envelopes. Master Ming Sheng handed one more red envelope to the Mentor, but he didn't fold it. He looked at Master Cheng Yen and said, "Take a break, take a break." But Master Cheng Yen kept on folding red envelopes, saying that folding them was a form of exercise and people had to exercise to keep healthy.

She continued, "Master, you should improve your health. When you're better, I'll go to China with you." Master Ming Sheng replied, "We'll all go together."

The Mentor chuckled and sighed. He was fully aware that Master Cheng Yen was always occupied with a heavy workload, and he always reminded her to take care of her health and not to overwork herself. He himself was able to live so long because he was never nervous about anything and instead just focused on doing the best he could. If Master Cheng Yen felt upset over the death of a senior Tzu Chi commissioner, the Mentor reminded her to look beyond it. When Master Cheng Yen lost weight because of her worries over the Tzu Chi missions, he told her to take care of herself in order to do her work better.

The Mentor expected that the altruistic missions undertaken by Tzu Chi would continue forever and manifest the core value of compassion that Buddhism so highly emphasizes.

He also reminded all Tzu Chi people to compassionately engage in charitable activities without taking their own interest into consideration. It would be rather selfish to do good deeds only in the hope of cultivating merits and blessings for oneself. One had to keep oneself pure both physically and psychologically and focus on removing all worries, as well as refrain from committing wrong deeds. One needed to diligently cultivate one's wisdom by abiding by the precepts, concentrating one's attention, and developing one's wisdom, in that order.

Let's rewind time and go back 42 years to find ourselves once again in the Huiyi Lecture Hall.

Master Yin Shun walked from the main hall to the female disciples' dormitory. Master Hui Zhang recalled that the Mentor hardly ever came to their dormitory--it was they who went to attend classes in the lecture hall. When Master Hui Zhang opened the door, she saw the Mentor smiling and guessed something wonderful had happened. The venerable master sat down and told the nuns that he had accepted a new disciple in a very simple manner. They later learned that it was Master Cheng Yen.

The Mentor has always thought of this event as an incredible chance meeting in his life. As for Master Cheng Yen, she has continued to grab at every moment in order to uphold her mentor's original expectation. "Be committed to Buddhism and all living beings" is and continues to be Master Cheng Yen's lifetime goal. It is also the firm foundation on which Tzu Chi continues to grow.

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The dharma lineage, the teachings handed down from master to disciple, will continue to strengthen throughout time.

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