

A Glimpse into His Thoughts

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Sunday, 25 December 2005 00:00

As part of making a documentary Master Yin Shun, Tzu Chi Great Love TV producers held weekly interviews with the great monk. The interviews, each about two hours, took place from July 21, 2002, to March 8, 2003. The master also answered many questions from his followers during several stays at the Abode of Still Thoughts in Hualien.

This article presents excerpts from those interviews and question-and-answer sessions. It is hoped that this sampling will allow our readers a chance to glimpse the deep wisdom of Master Yin Shun's thoughts.

Responsibility of Buddhists: Be committed to Buddhism and all living beings

Master Yin Shun's teaching:

I expect Buddhists not to depart from the essence of Buddhism whether they are studying, working, or compassionately helping others. Now that they have been born as human beings, they have to be committed to Buddhism and all living beings. They have to do the best they can and help as many people as they can.



You were the first monk in Taiwan to receive a Ph.D., and you have been named the "Seed-Sower of Humanized Buddhism" and the "Mentor of the Century." You have also received a medal from the government. What is your opinion about all of this recognition?

I'm only an ordinary person, so I do ordinary things. I have never thought about what I should do and what I have to achieve. I just do my best.

I teach, but unlike the Buddha, I do not teach my own knowledge. I simply interpret in modern language what the sutras or commentaries are saying. That deserves no special recognition. No one can influence other people with just a few articles. I just did my best and did as much as I could. I didn't worry about whether other people liked them or not.

You have never been in good health, but you have read and written many books. How did you manage to do this?

I'm ashamed to say that I am not as healthy as most people. My health has been poor since I was a child, and it became even worse after I became a monk. When I came to Taiwan, I felt miserable. [Master Yin Shun grew up in much cooler areas of mainland China.] I couldn't sleep well in the heat of summer, I had no appetite, and even my memory was bad.

I have been sick throughout my life; I even contracted tuberculosis. At that time, there wasn't any medicine or cure for it. I still don't know how I survived. Sometimes I felt so weak that I couldn't even read a book!

Later on, I suffered a blockage in my small intestine, and I had to have two operations. I really didn't want to have the surgery. I was already so frail that I couldn't do anything useful, not even

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write any more books. I felt that I wasn't any good to Buddhism and that there was no point in continuing to live on like that. Nevertheless, I had the operations, and I've kept on living for quite a while.

No one can influence very many people just by writing a few articles. I've only tried my hardest to do as much as I could. Whether or not people accept it is another matter.

It wasn't easy for you to build several temples and lecture halls while you were physically ill. Why did you do it?

Temples are very important to Buddhism because they contain the sutras and the monks and nuns. The Buddha, the dharma (the Buddha's teachings), and the sangha (community of monks and nuns) are the Three Treasures of Buddhism. If you want to promote Buddhism and make it accessible to the people, you need temples.

Nurturing talented Buddhists is an important task. You can't depend on laypeople who have only a basic education in Buddhism to promulgate the religion. You have to improve education for monks or nuns and encourage people to do research on Buddhism. Only in this way will Buddhism be able to prosper in the world.

Based on the two Buddhist concepts of doing personal spiritual cultivation inwardly and promoting the Buddha's teachings outwardly, I founded the Fu Yan Abode and Hui Ri Lecture Hall. These two places aren't my personal properties. They're open to anyone who can come to do their spiritual cultivation or promote Buddhism.

I expect monks and nuns to carry out their spiritual cultivation, to always demonstrate the Buddha's compassion, to adjust themselves to changes of time and place, and to give talks on Buddhism. If laypeople have problems, monks or nuns should console them, relieve them of their problems, and guide them to walk on the right path. In this way, everyone can benefit from the Buddha's teachings.

You once wrote in your autobiography, "I'm like a leaf falling onto water, following the current and stopping and circling around from time to time. Sometimes I am overwhelmed by waves and sometimes the water is calm, but I continue flowing forward." Why did you describe your life as a leaf on water?

Everything comes into being and ceases to exist as their elements and conditions come together or separate. I wanted to become a monk so I went to Beijing, but the Buddhist school was closed; then I went to Ningbo and then to Mount Puto [all in China]... Like a leaf, my life flowed from one event to another. Flowing and flowing, that was my life. I couldn't stop it or control it.

I'm not saying that I could ever realize all my dreams. However, my life has been determined by all the past and current karma and conditions which are beyond my control. I can't just decide how my life should be. Instead, I simply have to learn to accept what comes to me.

The first half of your life was in constant turmoil, but you could abide by the Buddha's teachings. The second half was even more chaotic, but you could still advance in

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Buddhism. Perhaps I can describe your life with this passage from the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings: "The minds [of the bodhisattvas] are calm and clear, and they remain in this state for eons. All of the innumerable teachings have been revealed to them, and having attained great wisdom they comprehend all things."

I haven't reached this level. No way! What a joke!

"Their minds are calm and clear, and they remain in this state for eons," this line refers to how the great bodhisattvas feel in their spiritual cultivation. The second sentence refers to their achievements in their cultivation; it also means, "They use meditation to bring out wisdom."

My life is ordinary. It is very ordinary, and I don't want to become extraordinary.

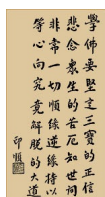
The key points in practicing Buddhism: this moment, this place, this person

Master Yin Shun's Teaching:

Many Buddhists have learned to focus on chanting the holy name of Amitabha Buddha in the hope of reaching the Western Pure Land. They seem to believe that the sooner they exit this earthly world, the better everything will be.

The truth is that, in practicing Buddhism, we must capture and advocate its true essence right at this time, in this place, and for all people. Do not forget to put what we have learned from the Buddha's teachings into practice in the very place we live and at this very moment.

No one is an island in this world. All of our lives are intertwined. Thus, learning to behave as the Buddha in our everyday lives will bring benefits to ourselves and everyone around us.



When you compare this society with the ideal one described in the Buddhist sutras, how do you feel?

As recently as 70 years ago, the practice and expression of Buddhism in China was flawed and distorted. Most spiritual cultivators of the time were concerned only with their own spiritual advancement. They practiced Buddhism to enrich themselves, admired recluses searching for enlightenment apart from society, and worshiped those purporting to possess supernatural powers. Many also believed and engaged in such activities as praying and consulting oracles, building temples, attending repentance rituals and other Buddhist ceremonies, and seeking blessings from the "divines." Some monks with little or no understanding of the Buddha's teachings even led the same lifestyle as laypeople.

I knew they were not following the Buddha's teachings. Their practice of Buddhism was not what the Buddha had intended and I felt uneasy about it. I wanted to find the source of their

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misconceptions and their misguided behavior. Buddhism is so wonderful, but what had led these people to behave that way, so far off the mark? Did such deviation originate in China or had it already occurred in India? I wanted to find out. I wanted to rectify these misunderstandings so that the true teachings of the Buddha could manifest themselves again.

I was very touched when I read in the Ekottara-agama that, "Many buddhas attain buddhahood in this world. They do not accomplish this in heaven." [Heaven is just another destination in the cycle of reincarnation, and heavenly beings also eventually die and are reborn in another life. Since there is no suffering in heaven, residents cannot earn merits by helping each other and thus cannot attain buddhahood.] In other words, you shouldn't practice Buddhism with the hope of rising to the heavens. Only in this world can you practice Buddhism and eventually attain buddhahood [thus breaking free from the cycle of reincarnation].

It follows that Buddhist practice cannot be solely limited to meditating and attending Buddhist ceremonies to the exclusion of everything else. Other legitimate approaches to living as the Buddha intended include vowing to seek a bodhi mind (bodhicitta), engaging in acts of charity, abiding by the precepts, demonstrating tolerance, showing diligence in all things, and seeking wisdom.

The correct spiritual practice of Buddhism can start from cultivating a deep vow of altruism, showing strong compassion for all living things, and trying your best to do things that benefit others.

How can "humanized Buddhism" be realized by monks and nuns as well as by the laity at home?

Those practicing Buddhism should benefit themselves with meditation and the search for wisdom, and benefit others with benevolence and compassion. Benefit yourself by using wisdom to purify your mind and tame your worries. Benefit others with all sorts of good deeds; however, do so without expecting any merits or blessings in return.

The work of promoting the Buddha's teachings is not reserved for only monks or nuns. Laypeople who have a profound understanding of Buddhism can also do so. You should help your family members believe in Buddhism first. After that, you can reach out to influence your friends, and eventually people in all of society.

For example, laypeople practicing Buddhism at home should keep their own families in harmony. It runs against the Buddha's teachings for husbands and wives to bicker and quarrel. Practicing Buddhism means walking on the Path of the Bodhisattvas--offering material goods to the poor, comforting the sick who have lost hope, and cheering people up when they are tortured with worries and hardships. Play the role that is appropriate for you and help however you are able. Gradually your merits will accumulate to the point of attaining the buddhahood.

Many people who study the Buddha's teachings have only one objective in mind--to reach Amitabha Buddha's Western Pure Land. This approach is fine, as far as it goes. However, their lives there will be dull because there are no good deeds to perform in that realm.

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Are temples the only appropriate venues for practicing Buddhism?

The Buddha's teachings are omnipresent in this world. Thus, observing proper manners in society is in itself a way of practicing Buddhism. This includes respecting our parents and being courteous to our brothers and sisters.

Imagine someone who devoutly helps others and volunteers at temples but returns home and throws temper tantrums with his family for no apparent reason. Although this person practices Buddhism quite rightly in the temple, does this give him an excuse to behave inappropriately at home? This is an example of forgetting to be always humble and respectful once we start to behave like the Buddha. Buddhism should be appropriately practiced wherever you are, not just in a temple.

A taxi driver once asked me how to practice Buddhism, and I told him to act like a good Buddhist by driving mindfully. Perform your own duties earnestly. It is just as simple as that.

You once said: "You should derive a proper faith from the Three Treasures and Right View. This belief leads to Right Behavior, which in turn leads toward the Buddha's Way. You should promote and protect Buddhist dogma, and help others as you help yourself." Many people use this to guide their practice of Buddhism. Can you elaborate on this?

Those practicing Buddhism need to have a devout belief in the Three Treasures: the Buddha, the dharma (his teachings), and the sangha (the assembly of monks or nuns). This belief comes first from a proper knowledge and understanding of the law of cause and effect [everything that happens to us is the result of something we did before], followed by a realization of the proper ways to cultivate spirituality.

Without the guidance of Right Understanding, you can easily lose sight of the real object of your belief. In the absence of a Right View of the Buddha's teachings, you can only blindly follow the crowd, worshiping busily and aimlessly at certain temples or following certain monks simply because they're the latest fashion. In this case, your faith becomes nothing more than superstition. This approach is misguided from the beginning because of the lack of Right View. Right View leads to Right Behavior. Only in this way can you truly vow to seek a bodhi mind in order to cultivate yourself and benefit others.

The key points in spiritual cultivation: the Three Immeasurable Studies of precepts, contemplation, and wisdom

Master Yin Shun's Teaching:

To gain fame or fortune, some people will try everything they can to gain the upper hand at the expense of others. However, a genuine Buddhist practitioner with the Buddhist precepts solidly in mind will have a pure body and mind and will refrain from harboring evil thoughts and demonstrating such behavior.

Based on the foundation of the precepts, you can develop authentic contemplation. Pure contemplation ensures that you will not go down the wrong path. You can then discover true

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wisdom.



How will the idea of "behaving like the Buddha" help one's life?

For some people, the idea of "behaving like the Buddha" involves nothing more than chanting Amitabha Buddha's name and prostrating themselves in front of the Buddha's statue from time to time. But what can they get from all this? They are merely beginners in learning the Buddha's teachings.

The dharma (the Buddhist teachings) does not care what sect you follow. Rather, it asks that you know how to distinguish right from wrong and how to properly eradicate worries. If you get angry without justification and feel okay about it, then you are not learning to behave like the Buddha. Instead, you should learn to apply the dharma in your life by knowing what worry is, how to handle it, and the proper way to decrease it. Likewise, eliminating greed, anger, and delusions will help you unload a lot of mental anxiety.

In this way, you will gradually purify yourself. Truly "behaving like the Buddha" will eventually lead to an unencumbered and carefree life. Once you have no worries, congratulations! You have freed yourself from the bondage of life and death.

There are some shortcuts for learning the Buddha's teachings, and they can be used to help us cope with some of the problems that we encounter in life. However, their value is limited in that they can never help us deal with the core questions of life and death.

Examples of these shortcuts include using the notion of the filthiness of the human body to rid yourself of greed, or counting breaths to overcome worries. If you are scared of walking at night, you could chant Amitabha or recite a mantra to boost your courage. However, it must be remembered that these are only short-term solutions, to be employed only for specific situations. You have to know when and where to use them. Using them for long periods of time will prove ineffective or cause problems to arise.

What are the precepts? How can one obtain contemplation? And where does wisdom come from?

Precepts are rules for guiding behavior: how you conduct yourself, talk, and interact with others. The rules for Buddhists to follow in a group setting are the precepts. The precepts are the most basic of the three concepts. If you can't even abide by such basic precepts as "Do not kill," "Do not lie," or "Do not be greedy," then what can spiritual cultivation bring to you?

The principle of contemplation means giving undivided attention with an uncluttered, undisturbed mind that knows what you are doing at any point in time. You should cultivate contemplation by having a proper faith. If you constantly change your beliefs or become upset at hearing a contrary point of view, how can you be liberated from worries and earthly suffering?

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If you can behave in accordance with the Right View, then you will be fully at ease and at peace.

Contemplation means having a crystal-clear awareness of your own thoughts, from the moment they first begin to appear in your mind. It means being fully aware of a good thought from its inception, so that it can be protected and cultivated. It also means being aware when a bad thought is about to arise, so you can nip it before it ever has a chance to lead you astray.

Standing firm on the base of the precepts, you might reach the state of an undisturbed mind--that is, a small measure of contemplation. Many people will mistake this state for "enlightenment." It is just not so. We can only say that this small degree of contemplation is needed to stay on the right course. If you do not even attain this lower level of contemplation, there is no hope of obtaining real wisdom, no matter how many sutras you study.

Even after learning and abiding by all the precepts and achieving a high degree of contemplation, you still need to work hard to reach the ultimate state: wisdom.

A mind that is simply concentrated and contemplative is still far from attaining wisdom. Sometimes, people who have reached only thus far will let their guard down or allow external stimuli to distract them. As a result, their minds may at times slip out of that state of tranquility and begin to worry again.

We need to repeatedly practice, observe, and ponder our bodies, minds, and exterior circumstances so that our minds can remain in a state of contemplation at will. This degree of frequent contemplation will offer the conditions in which wisdom can evolve.

The cultivation of wisdom can be based on three approaches: listening, reflection, and practice. For example, you read a sutra, and then you listen to how learned teachers expound on that sutra. You ponder, consider, and reflect, asking yourself what the Buddha was teaching and why he was teaching it. This will lead to understanding. This is a much more active process than mere memorization, which is not an effective way to perceive the Buddha's teachings. Finally, you must be able to tie everything together and put the teachings of the sutra into practice. This is true wisdom.

Some purport that practitioners of Buddhism only need to chant the name of Amitabha Buddha.

The proponents of Mahayana Buddhism encourage practitioners to seek a bodhi mind (bodhicitta) and to emancipate all living beings from their suffering. To achieve this, they are to conduct themselves in such a way as to benefit themselves and all others. Many people are discouraged by this seemingly daunting task and choose to chant Amitabha as a shortcut.

In Mahayana Buddhism, chanting Amitabha is considered an easy way to begin to develop a bodhi mind. Sometimes, a practitioner, whether alone or in a group, can chant Amitabha and attain the state of an undisturbed mind and be totally at ease and happy.

However, it isn't the actual name that is important; in fact, you can chant any buddha's name

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and achieve the same results. The most important point about chanting a buddha's name is that it must be accompanied by your attentive heart and mind, your full devotion and undivided attention.

Incorrect chanting--just mindlessly and perfunctorily chanting with the mouth--does not do a bit of good, regardless of how long or how frequently you chant. It is ridiculous for people who are so eager to reach buddhahood in this lifetime to think that they only need to engage in mindless chanting. In fact, I find this kind of chanting ludicrous.

I can suggest a correct way to chant a buddha's name. Start with brief but high-quality chanting. Focus your mind on the buddha's name without a tinge of worry and thought. Gradually, your mind will settle down. You can then increase the duration of your chanting. It is best if you can experience some degree of contemplation.

Some people state that when you chant a sutra, it is not necessary to understand it. They claim that you will naturally understand it after a great deal of chanting. What do you think of that idea?

It is essential that you understand the true intent and meaning of a sutra. There are two reasons for chanting the sutra. One is to settle the mind down by focusing on the sutra. The other is so that you will get a deeper understanding when the sutra is expounded by others. How can these be attained if you don't understand the sutra?

How do you suggest a practitioner should ensure the correct direction of his spiritual cultivation?

First, you must have complete confidence in Buddhism if you want to cultivate your spirituality. Get to know the beauty and pragmatism of Buddhism and learn the correlation between the extent of practice and the resulting pragmatic state that a practitioner can expect to attain. This will help build up a practitioner's confidence, helping him or her to progress gradually toward the goal. It cannot be attained overnight.

Furthermore, spiritual cultivation requires that the practitioners give their total and undivided attention to their objective.

Facing social chaos: doing your best

Master Yin Shun's Teaching:

Everybody is in society. No single person can change society, but a lot of people working together can influence it. Just do what you have to do and do your best. Always working hard for goodness is true progress.

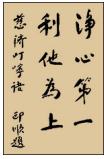
From the news reports, society seems to be in chaos. How can the Buddha's teachings help?

This is not easy. Things come and go according to the convergence and divergence of various conditions. People nowadays are becoming more and more clever and have learned to cause

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more and more disruptions and problems in society and the world.



People have become so self-centered. They aren't interested in normal, everyday things, and instead they behave in strange and peculiar ways because they want to attract attention to themselves. They are happy when they become famous or get things for themselves. They are only concerned about themselves and nothing else. They are shortsighted and are only concerned about whether they can get what they want. They aren't concerned about other people.

Learning the Buddha's path also emphasizes "I," the self, but to understand yourself, you must know which path to take in life. And not just in this life, but in the next life as well.

If you believe in the law of cause and effect, you won't do what you shouldn't do. If you can do something, you must do it to the best of your ability. Everyone must carry out his duties well so that society won't become so chaotic.

For the past 100 years, technology has been moving forward at an increasingly fast rate. Much of this progress has seemed to benefit society. But there are some advancements that are of concern to us, like the ability to produce human clones. What is Master Yin Shun's opinion about this?

If you understand the world through the Buddha's dharma, you will see that everything has a side effect. Seeking scientific advancement has the potential for abnormal side effects. Some of these side effects may even be harmful to ourselves.

All innovations seem beneficial to human beings at first. Some people say that progress is good and praise the source of that progress. But this is a type of ignorance in human civilization. In the end, such progress may prove not to be good. Gradually, some people will use new advances in harmful ways. This can't be avoided. Progress that comes too quickly can be particularly dangerous.

In the end, we must emphasize the things that are positive--ethics and peace. It is good to promote these ideas, and not focus on the value of technological advancement. Focusing our attention on the wrong areas will cause problems.

There are more and more disasters in the world. What should we do?

In Buddhism, there are forces of creation and destruction, and there are times of success and times of failure.

Earth is subject to the same forces. It will certainly decay. It won't stay in this present state forever. Like all things, it too has a time limit.

Since earth will decay and die one day, what is the purpose of spiritual cultivation?

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People go through the cycle of birth, aging, decay, and death. Whenever there is birth, there is death, but that doesn't mean emptiness. People are always reborn again.

People have to strive for the right path and encourage other people to do good deeds. People should work together. No single person can accomplish everything by himself, so people must work on good deeds together.

I am not saying that the earth won't decay and die if we do a lot of good deeds. This is impossible. But we can improve society that way. The Buddha once said that we travel on our own paths after we die. If we do good deeds, we will receive good karma for our next lives.

Compiled by the editors of Tzu Chi Monthly

Source: Tzu Chi Quarterly Winter 2005