

The Attainment of Buddhahood Lies in the Attainment of Humanhood – *Rencheng Ji Fochang*

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Introduction

The following discussion is linked to the discourse surrounding Buddhist modernism, in particular, the role played by Chinese Mahayana Buddhism in addressing the moral crisis fomented by modernization globally. The intellectual ferment which produced the phenomenon known as Taiwanese engaged (or reformed) Buddhism - a particularly successful example of Buddhist modernism - was primarily initiated by two outstanding monks from China, Venerable Taixu (1890 – 1945) and Venerable Yinshun (1906 – 2005), who subsequently migrated to Taiwan.

In this paper, I will endeavor, firstly, to trace the roots of contemporary Taiwanese (engaged) Buddhism, and secondly, to present some of its key figures and their achievements in Taiwan today. The fact that the key figures I selected are all *bhikshunis* attests to the thesis propounded, i.e., that given the opportunity, female sangha can contribute as much, if not more, to the development of society – and the development of a contemporary and socially relevant form of Buddhism – than can male sangha. This is notwithstanding the fact that it is still male sangha who hold most of the reigns in leading Buddhist institutions, serving as their guides and intellectual preceptors. Ultimately, this discourse is linked to the hypothesis, posed so trenchantly by Richard Madsen, of the possibility that, in his words, “... (Taiwanese) humanistic Buddhist...organizations (act) as a source of wisdom and generosity and solutions to the world’s problems, a Buddha’s light to the world” (2007:141).

Venerable Taixu

In keeping with Madsen’s line of enquiry, yet another scholar corroborates his findings: “Short-lived in China, the humanistic Buddhism pioneered by Ven. Taixu has flourished in Taiwan and provided potentially fertile ground for democratic learning” (Kuo, 2008:15).

Before this could happen, however, it may be instructive to explore the original impetus for its development in the conditions present in 19th century China. As recounted by Don Alvin Pittman, a specialist on Taixu’s reforms, this was an age in which “Chinese intellectuals were engaged in a re-evaluation of the very foundations of their ancient culture, due to serious dynastic decline and growing influence of western civilization” (2001:13). He said that sangha leaders in China began to realize that both secular humanism and Christianity would present Buddhism with ever more serious challenges and that in this era of social change and civic strife, Taixu (meaning ‘supreme emptiness’), a young Buddhist monk from Zhejiang province, emerged on the scene and, in the spirit of the times, apparently wished to contribute to what Pittman terms “the creation of a new social order – indeed, of a new humanity ...(which) was the common goal of the intellectuals of the age” (2001:59;21). Whalen Lai corroborates his findings in stating: “It was Taixu who brought Buddhism out of the cloisters into the modern world, revived the Mahayana commitment to working in the world, who directed Buddhist reflection to current social issues...” (quoted by Pittman, 2001:267).

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Taixu (also spelled 'T'ai-Hsu') was ordained in 1904, when he was only 14. He had been a student of Yang Wen-hui, who was called 'the father of the revival of Chinese Buddhism'. In his efforts to train the sangha for missionary activities abroad, Yang emphasized Dharmalakṣaṇa, the 'Mind only' School of Chinese Buddhism, as he felt it was most suited to modern science. "Yang was the first Chinese Buddhist to go to Europe, become acquainted with European science and to think of Buddhism as a world religion in a scientific world" (Comp. Welch, 1968:2–22).

In his *Outline of Buddhist History*, Taixu asserted that Buddhism's failure to remain a vital force in modern China was due to the other-worldliness of the sangha and the tendency of Buddhists to emphasize the externals of the religion without understanding its essence (2001:71). Pittman explains that Taixu thus called for a 'Buddhist revolution', a revitalization of Buddhism through institutional reorganization, modern education, compassionate social action and ecumenical cooperation in a global mission. He was an 'energetic, intelligent leader...more concerned with establishing a Pure Land on earth than in achieving rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha. Though he sought to ground his teachings in the Mahayana scriptures and traditional paradigms, he intended to directly address the pressing social and spiritual problems of the (early) 20th century... leading to the ethicization of religion and a this-worldly soteriology' (2001: 2-3). While keen on the *Weishi* (consciousness-only) school, Taixu believed righteous actions were at the heart of the spiritual life. He gave priority to the selfless modes of action that both expressed and produced insights into emptiness, while emphasizing that wisdom could not be attained apart from compassionate actions in the world. Thus he emphasized those ethical norms of Buddhist heritage that especially related to social responsibility. He affirmed a soteriology that understood personal repentance as intrinsically related to the transformation of the entire social order. Unlike many of his contemporaries in the sangha, he understood action within the socio-political sphere to be a primary means to complete enlightenment, not an obstacle to it (2001: 7 – 8).

Taixu saw as the fundamental dilemma of the modern secularized age the catastrophic loss of any adequate foundation for moral action. He argued that the development of modern science, however beneficial, had effectively discredited all god-language, had undermined both theological and philosophical ethics and had fuelled a consumerism that threatened to destroy all civility (2001: 9). His goal, in this connection, was to capture the imagination of an increasing number of educated young Chinese who thought of Buddhism as antiquated and darkly pessimistic. Towards this aim, he proposed the creation of 'new monks' and a total reorganization of the sangha, calling for closer ties between the monastic and lay communities, and proposing new measures of cooperation (2001: 62). Taixu felt that the reformation of the sangha in particular called for a drastic reduction in its size, redefining its role in society to reflect his own norms of ethical piety: a moderate number of professional monks would perform good works to benefit society as a whole like operating schools, orphanages and hospitals, under the direction of a small cadre of scholar-monks, experts in doctrine, with the backing of an equal number of elderly monks, specialists in meditation and chanting. The majority of so-called 'monks' would perform manual labor to support Buddhist mission (2001: 95). It must be noted that Buddhism was only able to spread widely in China once the sangha realized that the Chinese would not tolerate a 'parasitic' lifestyle based entirely on alms gathering. In line with the 10th century Chan master Baizhang Huaihai's oft-quoted slogan 'a day without work, a day without eating', the Chinese sangha were obliged to grow their own vegetables, as they are strictly vegetarian, which still remains, to a large extent,

the case today. In line with his principals, Taixu founded the Wuchang Buddhist institute in 1922, which was devoted to monastic education. He involved his seminarians and lay supporters in social service consisting in providing free medical treatment, establishing a modern school for children and a welfare program for those in need which encompassed a hospice, prisoner welfare service, assistance in disaster relief efforts, mostly done through his Right Faith Buddhist Society of Hankou which became 'one of the most socially active lay Buddhist Associations in China', espousing many branches throughout the country (2001:96 – 102). He was instrumental in founding the World Buddhist Federation which held its first conference in 1924, making an appeal for ecumenical cooperation in East Asia. Buddhism, he proposed, could provide the only basis for a 'universal civilization and philosophy' because it teaches that all sentient beings are one and that 'all human egos are bound together by bonds of sympathy'. In regard to science, Taixu said that Mahayana Buddhism is both scientific *and* unscientific: while in consonance with the insights of science, dharmic truth transcends and perfectly completes them (2001: 165).

Venerable Yinshun

Yinshun was Taixu's most gifted student, his biographer, and was said to have founded what has been called 'the Yinshun Age' lasting from 1952, the year he migrated to Taiwan, to 1994, when he ceased writing due to ill health.

Having become a monk at 24, Yinshun began a systematic study of Buddhist scriptures at Taixu's South Fujian Seminary in Xia'men. After the communist victory in 1949, he first moved to Hong Kong and then to Taiwan. In Pittman's opinion, Yinshun's contribution lies in the fact that he took Taixu's critique of the then-current belief system a step further. At the time, people generally thought that to be a Buddhist meant one had to accept a belief in spirits and other supernatural beings, perpetuating a stereotype that Buddhist monks specialized in dealing with the dead and otherworldly (2001:209), hence Taixu's slogan to counteract this being 'Buddhism for the living'. In Yinshun's estimation, however, Taixu had insufficiently denounced the adoration of divinities in popular Buddhism, remarking that "Sakyamuni Buddha was neither a god nor a demon, neither a son nor a messenger of god. All Buddhas and world-honored ones arise from within this world and not from those gods...all Buddhas arise from the human realm and not from heaven" (2001: 270).

In the opinion of Chu, where Yinshun chiefly differed from Taixu was that Taixu's call for revolution was primarily directed at institutional reform, whereas Yinshun was critical of much of Chinese Buddhist thought. Where they agreed was in their condemnation of the conventional Pureland ideal of escaping the world to be reborn in Sukhavati. They consequently both tried to reverse people's fixation on a distant Pureland, back to the present world. Both advocated a view of Mahayana Buddhism as 'a courageous undertaking that expects no immediate relief from the travails of human existence' (2006: 177). According to Charles Jones, Yinshun modified Taixu's 'Buddhism for human life' into 'Buddhism in the human realm' (1999: 376) culminating in a new type of 'humanistic Buddhism'.

Whalen Lai, for his part, refers to Yinshun as '...the foremost leader of Chinese Buddhism, particularly as it has developed in post-war Taiwan'. Among his many achievements, in Lai's opinion, was the renewal of mutually enriching connections between traditional Chinese Buddhism and other Buddhist traditions, especially the Madhyamaka tradition of Nagarjuna, Candrakirti and Tsongkhapa. Yinshun emphasized the rationalism and humanism of Buddhism, while also bringing traditional Buddhist scholarship into dialogue with modern critical Buddhist studies as practiced in the west and particularly in Japan. Lai claims that Yinshun did even more than Taixu to rescue

Chinese Buddhism from the intellectual doldrums and spiritual decay of the late imperial period, plotting a course for Buddhism's future development by allowing its robust engagement with the modern world without forcing the severance of its traditional roots (quoted in Pittman, 2001, vii).

What is further significant for the present discussion is that Yinshun was, according to Chu, the first in the Chinese Buddhist to stress that Buddhism had initially been transformed out of recognition in India and Central Asia, then consequently, doubly disfigured in China. The Agamas taught him that "...all Buddhas have emerged from the human realm, none would ever attain Buddhahood in the heavens". This made Yinshun realize that Buddhism was at heart a down-to-earth religion, devised for human life and based on human values. For Buddhism to be human-centered, it not only had to be purged of its deities and ghosts, but also had to get rid of its 'Brahmanized' myths and mysticism (2006:213-214). What this meant was essentially a rejection of Indian Buddhism's devotional practices including chanting of names and mantras, rituals directed at appeasing the gods and extirpating evil karma, as a form of lowly deity worship and shamanism, besides the practice of austerities (2006:212).

Taixu's and Yinshun's doctrinal clash, in Chu's opinion, revolved around their estimation of the Pāli scriptures. Whereas Taixu classified them as [*Theravada*], Yinshun considered them as universally pivotal in all Buddhist traditions: "Doctrinal correctness in both vehicles should be measured by how much it conforms to the Agamas and Nikayas. To Yinshun, orthodox Mahayana teachings are elaborations and enhancements of basic themes found in the early texts, rather than innovations that supplanted and fundamentally deviated from them. The difference mainly lies in Mahayana's more skillful way of adapting to the world (2006: 248). Taixu's 'Buddhism for the living' was the slogan chosen in contrast to a Buddhism for 'death' and 'ghosts', whereas Yinshun's *renjian* (Buddhism for the human realm) was chosen in contrast to the metaphysical, Brahmanized and apotheosized realms. It was intended to supplement Taixu's view, not replace it" (2006: 254-255).

Chu asserts that "numerous religious reform measures are attached to Yinshun's rallying slogan of 'Buddhism for the human realm', and his influence has increased in all reputable Buddhist institutions and university programs in Taiwan... (Therefore) the dramatic transformation of Taiwanese Buddhism in recent decades may prophetically hint at a future trend that is gathering force in the new emerging landscapes of Buddhism, including the West" (2006: 439 – 440). It seems that this 'dramatic transformation' has been accomplished, to a considerable extent, due to the efforts of Taiwanese bhikshunis. Chu praises what he calls their unprecedented enthusiasm and accomplishments in scholastic and cultural activities, charitable affairs and community service, leadership and ministry positions, economic and other practical functions, both monastic and secular (2006: 435). What had been holding them back thus far, according to Yinshun, was 'the pan-Indian ascetic culture's non-Buddhist ways of male chauvinism, self-mortification and puritanical moralism' (2006:399). Explaining his critical appraisal of the 'Eight Special Precepts', Yinshun said that the "...shameless degradation and defamation of women were merely fictional narratives that misogynist writers had retroactively put into the Buddha's mouth (i.e., in the form of the Eight Special Rules)...in his opinion, particularly after the Buddha's demise, the differential treatment of women in the disproportionately patriarchal monastic environment, codified in the form of the Eight Special Precepts, has systematically smothered women's sense of self-worth and creativity, and deprived them of their proper role to contribute to Buddhism's religious and social functions" (2006:396;406).

Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that in a newly democratizing, increasingly affluent Taiwan in which education was a high priority for the population as a whole, the progressive nature of his thought should have been embraced and have had an equally profound effect on the bhikshuni sangha.

Venerable Cheng Yen

Perhaps the most remarkable of all Buddhist leaders influenced by these two reformers is the Venerable Cheng Yen, founder of the Tzu Chi Charitable Foundation, who has been called ‘the Mother Teresa of Asia’. The Tzu Chi phenomenon can be viewed as being evocative of what is in Richard Madsen’s opinion “...a remarkable religious renaissance that has been taking place in Taiwan from the mid-1980s up to the present – one part of a resurgence of public religious belief and practice that has been taking place throughout the world within the past generation” (2007:xviii-xix).

Based on a survey made by a business magazine in 2001 on the question of ‘who is the most beautiful person in Taiwan’, the one at the top of the list, Wei-Yi Cheng quotes, was not a movie star or a supermodel, but a fragile, elderly Buddhist nun, Bhikshuni Cheng Yen who is, in her opinion, ‘undoubtedly the best-known Buddhist nun in Taiwan’ (Cheng, 2007:39- 40), corroborated by my own observations in Taiwan as everyone I talked to seemed to know about the survey and agreed with its outcome. Chu states that at one point, one quarter of Taiwan’s population were registered members (2006:441), meaning they paid a regular membership fee and devoted their material and active support to its charitable activities. According to Tzu Chi specialist Julia Huang, 35 years after its establishment in 1966, it had become the largest formal NGO in Taiwan and a growing transnational association among overseas Chinese. By 2000, it had five million members worldwide, with branches in 28 countries (2003: 136) active, abroad and in Taiwan, chiefly in the fields of disaster relief, medical care, educational assistance, poverty alleviation, and environmental sustainability.

Venerable Cheng Yen founded Tzu Chi with only a small group of housewives who she had asked to donate 50 cents per day of their household money, for the support of the poor and needy. In building up her charitable foundation, she stresses that her guiding light all along has been Yinshun, whom she calls ‘The Mentor’. As the 2005 issue of the Tzu Chi Quarterly dedicated to him states: “Tzu Chi was founded on the basis of one sentence said by Yinshun to Cheng Yen after accepting her as his disciple in 1963: ‘Be committed to Buddhism and to all living beings’. (Cheng Yen stated): ‘If you ask me who had the most influence on me, I will say it was my dharma master’”. The journal continues: “Indeed, when questioned why the venerable monk had accepted her in the first place, he stated: ‘She had bought the collection of Master Taixu’s books, so I agreed to accept her’. Bhikshuni Cheng Yen recalled why she had bought the collection: ‘I had heard that if anyone could read Master Taixu’s books, it would be like reading the pure essence of Buddha’s philosophy’. So it was to be that a collection of books was the mystical link that connected three generations of teachers and disciples over two different centuries...Master Yinshun emphasized not only the principles of Buddhism, but also the importance of putting them into practice. That was the flowing spring that nourished Master Cheng Yen’s charitable deeds...they helped the poor and sick, woke up the Great Love in people’s hearts, and attracted growing numbers to join the new charity foundation” (2005: 25 – 26).

It is possible to conclude that whereas both Taixu and Yinshun had provided the blueprint for Tzu Chi’s ‘compassionate action’, Cheng Yen was the medium through which this was carried out. The fact that she is a bhikshuni, rather than a bhikshu, does not appear to be a coincidence, because, as many Taiwanese expressed to me and most of the scholars also state, the fact that she is female only adds to her appeal and success.

People identify her as a Guanyin-type figure, the Chinese embodiment of the Buddha of compassion, Avalokiteshvara. According to Jones, she embodies the Confucian concept of the strict father and the kind mother simultaneously: firstly, she is uncompromising in her challenge to greed and materialism, in her call for people to open their hearts to those unrelated to them; secondly, she has absolute moral integrity (1999: 385).

As stated by Huang, “Tzu Chi is ‘action dharma’...the emphasis is on the expression of feeling another’s suffering, leading to deep identity between the self and the sufferings of the world...til one reaches an awareness of the universal interconnectedness among beings and across lives. One develops ‘universal compassion’, the commitment to relieve the suffering of others...Cheng Yen’s ‘four immeasurables’ are the traditional Brahma Viharas: kindness, the mission of charity; mercy, the medical mission; sympathetic joy, the cultural mission, are Tzu Chi publications and their TV program, and impartiality, the transmission of education (2003: 141). Jones believes that ‘...perhaps more than any other Buddhist leader in Taiwan, her followers seek to emulate her in accordance with her dictum, ‘the master’s resolve is my resolve, the Buddha’s mind is my mind’ (1999: 386). Indeed, it is significant that Tzu Chi, though having been initiated by master Cheng Yen, is in fact an organization run by the laity along increasingly corporate lines. In Madsen’s words: “Tzu chi was to educate the ‘rich’ in the spirit of Buddhism by having them *practice* compassion...(therefore) it appealed to the newly rich who needed meaning and the newly poor who needed help” (2007:31,34). He charts its meteoritic rise from a modest charity devoted to helping mainly the poor and sick in the relatively backward province where it is based, Hualien, to providing disaster relief to earthquake victims (in which Tzu Chi volunteers were said to often have been faster than the government in providing aid to victims), to establishing a fully-fledged hospital in under-resourced Hualien in 1986, a feat having required Venerable Cheng Yen’s having to raise a sum of \$26 million dollars, which she, against all odds, managed to do. Since then Tzu Chi has added four more hospitals, its own medical educational institutions, numerous school for children – having developed its own series of textbooks and teacher’s manuals for teaching moral education - a comprehensive university in 2002 and a College of Technology, assets said to be in the billions of dollars. Always attentive to the pivotal role of the media, it has developed new popular magazines, radio programs, videos, websites and now has its own cable TV station. In 1991, it began to extend relief efforts beyond Taiwan’s borders and, according to Madsen, “Tzu Chi seems to take pride in responding to the most difficult and controversial situations” (comp. 2007, 34-36).

Unfortunately, it was not possible for me to meet venerable Cheng Yen as she has a very busy schedule and appears to be constantly surrounded by people seeking to shield her from the attention of researchers like myself. Besides having attended some meetings of the UK branch of Tzu Chi and two seminars organized by the LSE’s Taiwan Study Group, one held by representatives of Tzu Chi who had been invited from Taiwan, and the other by Richard Madsen, I went to visit a ‘Hall of Still Thoughts’ in Penang, which is an exact replica, I was told, of the original Tzu Chi headquarters in Hualien, on Taiwan’s southeast coast. It is remarkable for its simplicity, being reminiscent of the Tang dynasty Chinese architectural style, with notably few Buddha statues on the premises outside or inside. Manned by her volunteers known as ‘commissioners’, besides acting as a communication and coordination centre, it is a shrine devoted to her achievements and activities. It thus is testimony to what Wei-Yi Cheng indicates, that “...Cheng Yen could be an inspiration of Buddhist nuns’ empowerment...the success of Tzu Chi makes her a good example of what a Buddhist nun is capable of achieving (at least in temporal terms)” (Cheng, 2007: 43).

Venerable Shih Chao-hwei

Whereas Cheng Yen can be said to be representative of the older generation of Yinshun's monastic students, a leader of the younger generation, though herself nearing 60, is undoubtedly Shih Chao-hwei, a dynamic and outspoken nun, who is best known within the Taiwanese bhikshuni sangha for her militancy and uncompromising attitude when it comes to the issue of equality between monks and nuns. Most active in the field of Buddhist education and scholarship, she is a prolific writer who has written several popularly received books based on Yinshun's ideas and social ideals, while personally and actively participating in social and political, besides environmental campaigns.

Venerable Chao-wei appears to exemplify the successful adaptation of both Taixu's and Yinshun's reform agendas which can best be gauged by considering what Madsen calls the nature of Buddhism revivalism in Taiwan: "It is a kind of religious revival that holds out ...positive hopes for the building of a free world order..." (2007:151) A good example of this can be found in an incident which happened in 2002 when some of the most influential Buddhist leaders led by Ven. Chao-hwei, including Ven. Xingyun, the founder monk of Foguang Shan (Buddha's Light Mountain in southern Taiwan) and Ven. Cheng Yen attended a Buddhist panel formed in support of repealing the 'eight special precepts' (*attha Garudhammas*), the controversial vinaya rules stipulating the subordination of nuns to monks. It was on this occasion that Ven. Chao-hwei, in a symbolic gesture of defiance, tore up the Eight Special Precepts on the stage. The panel was held as part of Yinshun's birthday celebration and it was intended as a tribute to his influence in regard to the modernization and reforms of the sangha, a possible indicator of a society in which Yinshun's ideal of an egalitarian sangha could enjoy a wide appeal (Chu, 2006:426).

This incident, however, must be seen against the background of the dramatic shift in the ratio between monks and nuns as, for the first time in Chinese Buddhist history, the number of ordained nuns is higher than that of monks, at present about three or four to one (at least in Taiwan along with other countries in which Chinese Buddhism is practiced like South Korea and Malaysia) – though it must be noted that even at Taixu's time, there were equal numbers of both, though living in separate monastic institutions. The innovation in Taiwan is that, in many of the more prominent humanistic Buddhist monasteries like Foguang Shan and Fagu Shan, for example, both monks and nuns reside and practice together, though sleeping in separate quarters. There is no equivalent to the institution of eight or ten-precept nuns (for example, *maechis* in Thailand) present in most Theravada Buddhist countries, as the lineage of bhikshuni ordination has been unbroken in Chinese Buddhism.

I myself had the good fortune to interview the venerable nun at Hsuan Chuang University, a Buddhist university located in Hsin Chu City in central Taiwan, where she is Chair of the Department of Religion, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and Director of the Hsuan Chuang Applied Buddhist Ethics Research Centre. It was here that she was granted professorship, unusually, I was told, on the basis of her book *The normative Ethics of Buddhism*. This work was undoubtedly the result of studies she had done at Yinshun's Foguan Buddhist Institute from 1984 to 1988. She also has her own nunnery and Hongshi Fojiao Academy, a seminary in which the nuns have the opportunity of studying Yinshun's works, besides being engaged in various humanitarian and environmental activities. Among her many achievements, what also appears remarkable in the present context, is her appointment as the fourth (and sole female) member of INEB's board of spiritual advisors. The International Network of Engaged Buddhists is an organization based in Thailand founded by the Buddhist reformer Sulakh

Sivaraksha. The other board members are no less than His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh who originally coined the term 'engaged Buddhism', and the activist Thai monk, Somchai Kusalacitto.

Born in 1957 in Yangon, Burma, Chao-wei's parents returned to Taiwan in 1965. She ordained as a nun in 1978 while still an undergraduate in the Department of Chinese at the National Taiwan University. After graduation, unable to accept the conservative and authoritarian atmosphere of her temple, she left on a solitary retreat, where she discovered Yinshun's writings in 1982, which she continued studying until 1988. Besides her publications, which are highly acclaimed dealing mainly with the application of Buddhist principals to ethical concerns, she initiated a number of nation-wide, high-level social advocacy campaigns. Most notably, she got the Animal Protection Ordinance passed by the Taiwanese legislature. This included the prohibition of horse racing which she told me is cruel to horses in many ways, making Taiwan the only country to outlaw it. In addition, she often writes articles from the Buddhist perspective in a number of newspapers in relation to environmental protection, human and animal rights, and against the legalization of gambling which she successfully pushed through parliament. In early 1998, she founded the Hong Shi Culture and Educational Foundation, which from 1998 to 2006 organized six large-scale conferences on 'the Theory and Practice of Master Yinshun's Thoughts'. Significantly, it is due to her efforts that a translation group in an Australian monastery has been translating Yinshun's works, especially since the abbess, Ven. Neng Rong, was her own student.

In response to my question, 'What impresses you most about Yinshun's thoughts?' she replied: "Yinshun was a pioneer of Taiwanese Buddhism. As his follower, I want to transform his ideas into actions. This includes education, law and policies. I want to do what the master was unable to achieve. His ideas came first and the movements came later. His critical line of thinking led me to think that the biggest fault in Buddhist society is that justice isn't emphasized enough, just compassion and kindness. But Yinshun's thought led me to conclude that it's not true kindness if we don't emphasize justice, though if you examine the Buddhist scriptures closely, you can see that the Buddha emphasized *both* justice and kindness, equal participation and treatment".

My next question concerned the role of bhikshunis in Taiwanese society. She replied: "In Taiwan, bhikshunis are respected more than bhikshus. The most famous is Master Cheng Yen...When some special people become bhikshuni, they become a role model in society. It's only been in the past 20 years or so that people have changed their ideas about nuns, though." When I asked her the reason for her concerted campaign to eradicate the 'eight special rules' for nuns, her reply was: "There has been a long oppression of bhikshunis, but since my action (of publicly tearing them up) many bhikshunis no longer bow to the bhikshus...if you let bhikshus be too proud this isn't true compassion or modesty (on their part). It all comes down to the law of dependent origination...(understanding that no one should be above or below the other). Another reason for the greater prominence of bhikshunis in Taiwan may be that many bhikshus here prefer to be scattered in small temples or hermitages to practice dharma individually, whereas bhikshunis prefer to stay together. Men generally have a greater tendency to compete, whereas women like to cooperate and can combine their efforts to achieve something. The biggest female sangha is at Foguang Shan (where bhikshunis are said to outnumber bhikshus by around 10 to one, despite being headed by a bhikshu), whereas Tzu Chi (which only has a limited number of bhikshunis, as ordination is obviously considered secondary to the activities of lay Buddhists) is the most powerful. The more women who ordain, the better...there's still a lot more work for us to do."

Conclusion

As William Chu writes that the UNDP in its Gender Empowerment Measure (referring to the status of women) has rated Taiwan as the top Asian nation (number 19 out of 80 rated countries) (2006: 434), so it is perhaps not so surprising that bhikshunis feature so prominently in their practice of humanistic Buddhism. Charles Jones pointed to another issue surrounding the development of Taiwanese engaged Buddhism, which is "...the increasing lay-centeredness of Buddhism in Taiwan" (1999: 457), which is also mostly female-dominated, as illustrated by the example of Tzu Chi. A worrying trend, however, is the fact that monks do appear to be greatly in decline as against the growing numbers of nuns. In the opinion of Venerable Guo Yuan, one of Fagu Shan's head monks, "this is due to the nature of Taiwanese society itself, in which there is equality between the sexes probably due to the ever-increasing number of educated females, and, as men generally are expected to go out to work, women have more time for religion than men do. There is a tendency for women to spend more time in the temple and also, generally, Taiwanese society is more supportive of bhikshunis than bhikshus". In any event, as it appeared to me in the course of my visits to various institutions, were women to withdraw, the whole edifice would undoubtedly collapse. As regards the possible fate of the 'eight special rules', the entire issue no. 9 of the Hsuan Chuang Journal of Buddhist Studies is devoted to this topic with scholars from various countries, genders and backgrounds giving solid reasons for it deserving a speedy demise, in further vindication of Yinshun's philosophy.

To end on a less controversial note, the ultimate significance of Taiwanese engaged Buddhism can be encapsulated in Richard Madsen's closing thoughts: "...these moments of axial religious creativity offer glimpses of alternatives to the dysfunctional modernity that most of us experience, ways of softening global competition with global care, of situating the quest for individual freedom within global webs of responsibility, and of affirming global human solidarity while respecting diversity" (2007:157).

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