

Completing the Peace

MASTER YIN SHUN

(1906-2005)

By Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

The Chinese expression used to describe the death of an eminent monk or nun, *yuán jí*, literally means “completion of the peace.” On June 3rd, at 10:07 am in Taiwan, the Venerable Master Yin Shun “completed the peace,” bringing to an end a lifetime that spanned almost a full century. The passing of Master Yin Shun is especially significant for us here at Bodhi Monastery, for he was the teacher of our own founder and guiding elder, Master Jen Chun. He had thus been in a sense the “spiritual patron” of our monastery and its affiliate, the Yin Shun Foundation. While we feel poignantly the loss of this great mentor, we also celebrate the end of a life nobly lived in the service of the Dharma and all humankind.

During the course of his long life, Master Yin Shun came to be recognized as the foremost Chinese scholar-monk of the modern age, with close to fifty volumes to his credit. He had also established a Buddhist seminary, FuYan Institute of Buddhist Studies, in Hsin Chu, and a lecture hall, HuiJi, in Taipei. Master Yin Shun was not only a scholar, however; he was also a visionary and a reformer. Unlike the academic scholar, his erudition was not motivated by a mere thirst for factual knowledge about Buddhism, but by a desire to understand the fundamental truth of the Dharma – to understand Buddhism in its depths and as a whole. This urge for understanding was in turn driven by a conviction that the Buddha’s teaching provided the key to rescue the world from suffering, that it offered a “message of world benevolence.” When he first embraced the Dharma, however, he found the Chinese Buddhism that he encountered singularly unfit to meet this urgent challenge. He thus set out to use his understanding of Buddhist history and philosophy to transform the face of Chinese Buddhism and bring it into accord with the modern age. Though in his early years he faced stiff opposition from a conservative monastic establishment, especially after he migrated to Taiwan, for the past three decades he has been hailed as the most seminal thinker in the Chinese Buddhist world. In the eyes of many he would rank with the greatest Chinese masters of all time. A mark of the esteem he won was seen in the thousands of monastics and lay devotees who attended his funeral in Hsin Chu on June 11th. Even the president of Taiwan came to pay him farewell homage.

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(continued on page 2)

Completing the Peace *(continued from page 1)*

It is significant that Master Yin Shun did not come from a Buddhist family and thus did not receive the Dharma as part of his family heritage. He had to discover it at the end of a long and painful spiritual search that led him through Taoism, Confucianism, and even Christianity, and brought him to the edge of despair. Several years after he began to study Buddhism, both his parents died in close suc-

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cession, and this left him free to fulfill his heart’s desire to enter the homeless life of a monk. He received ordination in 1930, but his joy was soon overcast by shadows. When he saw how Buddhism was practiced in the China of his time, he was struck by the discrepancy between the Buddha Dharma he read about in the sacred texts and the stark actuality of Chinese Buddhism that he could observe around him: a religion mired in superstition, empty ritual, and blind devotion. This gap became the problem that obsessed him and that he sought to rectify in his writings.

To understand the degenerative tendencies in Chinese Buddhism, Master Yin Shun made a thorough study of the Chinese Tripitaka, going back to the Indian origins of Buddhism. Indian Buddhism thus became the focus of his scholarship. Early in his scholarly career he wrote a detailed history of Indian Buddhism and later produced several specialized studies of different topics in Indian Buddhist history. These include an insightful attempt to reconstruct the process by which the canonical collections of the early Buddhist schools were compiled; a volume on the development of the Abhidharma systems; and a 1300-page work on the origin and early history of Mahayana Buddhism. His writings also explored most of the Indian philosophical schools, with special emphasis on the Madhyamaka, which he considered the high point in the evolution of Buddhist thought. In *The Way to Buddhahood*, available in English translation (Wisdom Publications), the Master synthesized all the “vehicles” of Buddhism in accordance with a comprehensive scheme that unifies all the different Buddhist teachings into a single graded path.

Despite his vast achievements in the sphere of Buddhist scholarship, Master Yin Shun was not interested in knowledge for its own sake. His scholarship was driven, not by an urge for abstract knowledge, but by a determination to bring to light the potential of Buddhism as a world-redeeming, world-illuminating force. The transformed and purified form of Buddhism that Master Yin Shun advocated, which constituted his special platform, was what he called “Buddhism for the human realm.” Whereas many Chinese regarded Buddhism as a protection against ghosts and demons or as a ticket to a heavenly rebirth, he saw the Buddha’s teachings as a guide to the conduct of life in this world, the human realm in which we dwell. His approach to Buddhism thus sought to recover the human-centered side of Early Buddhism as well as of the early Mahayana. It also harmonized with the rich humanistic tradition of indigenous Chinese thought. However, for Master Yin Shun, the practice of Dharma was to be applied to life in this world not solely for mundane benefits – and this is an important qualification – but because this world provides the proper field for developing the qualities needed to achieve the ultimate, transcendent Buddhist goal: perfect Buddhahood. The “human vehicle” is not self-sufficient, but a means to enter the Buddha vehicle.

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As a Mahayana Buddhist, Master Yin Shun gave precedence to the practice of the bodhisattva path, but he emphasized the continuity of this path with the practices advocated in the Early Buddhism of the Agamas and Nikayas. He thus helped to recover this ancient stratum of Buddhist thought and practice, long lost in Chinese Buddhism. He did not give much credence to such ideas as “rapid attainment of Buddhahood” or “becoming a Buddha in this very life,” nor did he encourage the quest for rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha. He was particularly resistant to the deification of the buddhas and bodhisattvas and the “deity practices” of late Indian Mahayana, which he considered largely responsible for the decline of Buddhism in India. He stressed instead what he calls the “normal” bodhisattva path, which revolves around the generation of the bodhicitta, the cultivation of great compassion, the practice of the six paramitas, and the clarification of right view based on the wisdom of the middle way. His own great wish, which he often expressed in his writings, was to be reborn in the human world again and again and to follow the bodhisattva path as a human being.

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Master Yin Shun did not try to build a personality cult around himself, nor did he allow others to turn him into an object of adoration. As a man he was simple, humble, and unassuming; he always stressed the central importance of the Dharma, not of himself. During his life he was a true example of the Buddhist teaching of selflessness, which he himself explained with depth and clarity in his writings. Though his passing deprives us of his physical presence, he will live on in his teachings, above all in his books. It remains a major project for Buddhist scholarship in the West to see that these are translated into English. ☸



“May I be able to revisit this human world of suffering and hardship life after life, and dedicate myself to extol the voice of perfect enlightenment for humanity!”

IMPORTANT: Bodhi Monastery Closed to Public July 2nd - July 8th
Annual Summer Dharma Retreat in Session

NEWS BRIEFS

Ven. Jen Chun Returns from Taiwan

Shifu returned with Ven. Guo-Ching from his lecture tour of Asia on June 28th. In late June, Master Jen Chun extended his lecture tour and gave Dharma lectures in Beijing under the auspices of the China Buddhist Association.

Bhante Dharma Talks on the Kasibharadvaja Sutta in July

Ven. Bodhi will begin lecturing on the Kasibharadvaja Sutta (the former Bharadvaja) on July 16th, continuing with his series of lectures on selected suttas from the Sutta-Nipata. These lectures are on alternate Saturday afternoons at 12:40 pm. Ven. Xin-Xing lectures on the other Saturdays. A brief Q&A immediately follows the lectures.

Majjhima Nikaya Class Summer/Fall Session Begins August 9th

The first sutta we will study with Ven. Bodhi after the break will be the Lakutikakopama Sutta (MN 66). These classes meet Tuesday evenings from 7:00 - 8:15 pm.

Lectures on "The Way to Buddhahood" (in Chinese)

Teacher: Ven. Houzong

Schedule: Saturdays, July 9th, 16th, 23rd, and 30th, 2:30 pm
 Sundays, July 10th, 17th, 24th, and 31st, 9:00 am

Ven. Houzong, a Taiwanese monk who was ordained by Ven. Yin Shun in 1966 while a student at Fu Yan Institute. He is currently the abbot of Xiangshan Monastery in Xinju, Taiwan. He will be lecturing at the Dharma Retreat and will stay on for the month of July to give lectures on Master Yin Shun's "The Way to Buddhahood" (in Chinese only).

Monk from Fu Yan Institute to Visit for Six Months

Ven. Guangjing, a Taiwanese monk from Fu Yan Institute will be staying at Bodhi Monastery for six months beginning in July. He is a specialist in the Abhidharma Kosa.

Introduction to Buddhism Course in September

In September we will offer an "Introduction to Buddhism Course" that will run for 4-6 weeks on consecutive Saturday mornings. We will provide more information in the next bulletin.

Bhante's Lectures to be Featured on Local Cable Program in NY State

Venerable Bodhi's Saturday afternoon Dharma talks are to be one of the features on a new local public program "60 Minutes with Buddha" conceived and produced by Amolak Sehgal. This program will be aired on cable channel WLIW (21) and will be carried in several New York towns in Westchester and Dutchess counties including Poughkeepsie, Wappingers, and Fishkill. The schedule for the program has not been determined yet, but it will most likely begin airing in early August. Mr. Sehgal has been an active Buddhist for many years and is currently participating at Chuang Yen Monastery as Tour Guide.

JULY/AUGUST DHARMA SCHEDULE

SATURDAYS:

9:50 - 10:40 am Dharma Talk by
 Ven. Jen Chun
 or Study Groups
 10:50 - 11:10 pm Short Service
 11:15 - 12:15 pm Lunch and cleanup
 12:40 - 1:40 pm Dharma Talk* by
 Ven. Bodhi,
 Ven. Xin-Xing, or
 guest lecturer
 1:40 - 2:00 pm Q&A session
 2:30 - 4:00 pm Pali class**

* On July 9th there will be an open Q&A session instead of the afternoon lecture.

** On break until August 2nd.

FIRST SATURDAY OF EACH MONTH:

9:50 - 10:30 am Dharma Talk by
 Ven. Jen Chun
 or Study Groups
 10:40 - 11:10 pm Long Service

(The rest of the schedule follows as above.)

SUNDAYS:

9:30 - 10:45 am Meditation Group
 guided by resident
 monks

FIRST SUNDAY OF EACH MONTH:

9:00 - 9:30 am Beginners instruction
 in meditation

TUESDAYS:

7:00 - 8:15 pm Sutta Study Class*
 with Ven. Bodhi

* On break until August 9th.

DAILY:

4:30 - 5:00 pm Chanting Liturgy
 5:05 - 6:00 pm Sitting meditation