

In Memory of My Master, a Mentor for All Buddhists

Written by Master Cheng Yen
Monday, 25 April 2005 00:00

Two thousand five hundred years ago, Sakyamuni Buddha, the fundamental teacher for all Buddhists, attained enlightenment and began teaching people about the truth of the universe. After the Buddha entered nirvana, his disciples assembled to compile his teachings into scriptures. They asked Ananda, the Buddha's attendant noted for his excellent memory, to recite by heart all the lectures that the Buddha had delivered before he passed away. These sacred teachings were originally passed orally from generation to generation, and they were later collected and written down in formalized scriptures called sutras. Eventually, monks brought the sutras from India to China and translated them from the original Sanskrit into Chinese.



Because our language and culture have changed so much since the sutras were written, they have become too esoteric for ordinary people to understand. To help people in modern times comprehend and use these classic texts, we must rely on wise and knowledgeable Buddhist teachers to translate them. Master Yin Shun, widely known as "the Mentor," was exactly this type of teacher. He possessed the wisdom and ability to translate the original sutras into plain language that all could understand. In this way, he promoted a humanized understanding of Buddhism that could benefit all people.

Master Yin Shun was born in China a century ago. Although he lived in a turbulent and chaotic time, he persistently focused on studying and understanding the true nature of Buddhism. Not only did he make the sutras accessible to all, but he also profoundly incorporated his own wisdom into the interpretation of the Buddha's teachings and successfully promoted a new understanding of Buddhism. For close to eighty years, the Mentor shed light on the path of Right Thought and helped lead people suffering from delusion and ignorance onto the correct path of enlightenment. The Mentor was like a spring that nourished our wisdom-life, fed our hearts, and purified our minds. He opened up a clear path for those seeking the Way and kindled the light of wisdom for numerous Buddhists.

The Mentor kindly accepted me as his disciple over forty years ago. At that time, he instructed me to be committed to Buddhism and to all living beings. Ever since, I have endeavored to bring the Buddha's teachings into peoples' everyday lives, to show everyone that they can emulate the Buddha's compassionate behavior by rolling up their sleeves and helping the needy, and to help them become living bodhisattvas through the daily concrete practice of humanized Buddhism.

The laws of nature will always take their course. Although the Mentor had led a long life of 100 years, his passing was still natural and inevitable. My heart was heavy and I grieved over his death. However, I was also very grateful to my master, who used his life to promote humanized Buddhism and teach us to work for all living beings in a positive and constructive way. Although we bid good-bye to his mortal, physical body with utmost sincerity, we ought to welcome with a joyful heart the eternal spirit and wisdom of the Mentor that continues to guide us. I trust he will be reborn into this world soon.

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Encountering my master

Over forty years ago, a stroke suddenly took away my father's life. I was so shocked that for several days I could not even cry. Not long after his death, my father was buried. Looking at his coffin being gradually covered by soil, I kept asking myself, "Where did my father go? Is anyone keeping him company? Why is life so fleeting? What is the value of life?" My father's death raised within me so many questions about life.



Hoping to find answers to these questions and learn the meaning of life, I began to study Buddhism. At the age of 25, I decided to leave home and become a nun. Having seen that all Buddhist nuns shave their heads, I shaved my own head. I had no idea that I was making a big mistake because according to Buddhist etiquette, only a nun's dharma master can shave her head for the first time. After that, she is allowed to keep doing it herself. In 1963, I traveled from Hualien to Taipei to register for the precept-granting ceremony [a kind of one-month novitiate for prospective monks and nuns]. Unfortunately, I was told that I was not qualified to attend the novitiate even if I looked like a nun. The key problem was that I had no Buddhist master.

Just when I was about to leave Taipei, some nuns approached me. They thought it would be a pity for me to miss the precept-granting ceremony just because I had no dharma master. They suggested that I ask any monk or nun present to accept me as a disciple. However, I didn't feel that such an important decision should be taken so lightly. My master would be a spiritual guide and a beacon for the rest of my life. I told the nuns I would rather take my time to find my master than accept someone hastily just to participate in the ceremony.

Because the only Buddhist text I had at that time was the Lotus Sutra, I considered purchasing The Complete Teachings of Master Tai Hsu to study back in Hualien, since many people told me that I would learn the core essence of the Buddha's teachings by studying the books. After returning to the Bodhi Lecture Hall where I had stayed the previous night, I bumped into Master Hui Yin. She informed me that the books I was interested in were available at the Huiyi Lecture Hall. She was even kind enough to show me the way to the hall.

When we arrived there, Master Hui Yin told me that her dharma master, the Venerable Master Yin Shun, happened to be there, and she asked if I would like to meet him. I was surprised at my good luck. I had read Master Yin Shun's Brief Introduction to Buddhism, and the wonderful book had made a very deep impression on me. "Yes, I would very much like to meet him," I replied eagerly.

Along with Master Hui Yin, I happily went to the reception room and prostrated myself before the venerable master. Master Hui Yin explained to him, "She was here for the precept-granting ceremony, but she is going home now."

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"If she hasn't gone to the ceremony yet, why is she leaving?" Master Yin Shun asked. Hui Yin explained my situation to him. After the short conversation, we left the reception room to purchase the books for which I had originally come.

However, when I went to get the books, we found the room where the books were stacked was locked. Master Chang Jue, the monk responsible for the books, went off to get the key. Eventually, I was able to get the books in which I was interested. After I had bought them, packed them up, and prepared to leave, it suddenly started raining heavily. Master Yin Hai, the rector of the lecture hall, asked us to wait while he called a taxicab for us.

As we were waiting, I happened to see Master Yin Shun walking out of the reception room. "Could I become a disciple of your Mentor?" I asked Master Hui Yin. She said it was unlikely, because he rarely accepted disciples. Nevertheless, I begged her to check it out for me. "If I have a special karmic relationship with him, I will be accepted as his disciple. If not, I will agree to simply go back home," I added.

In response to my request, Master Hui Yin caught up with Master Yin Shun. They exchanged a few words. He looked at me and nodded his head with a smile. Master Hui Yin waved at me, and I quickly walked toward them.

The time was almost noon. The Mentor said to me, "The registration for the novitiate will be closing very soon. While there is still time, present yourself before the Buddha." I hurriedly prostrated myself before the Buddha's statue and then to my master. Master Yin Shun continued, "The karmic relationship between us is very special. Since you want to become a nun, you should be committed to Buddhism and all living beings. I give you the dharma name 'Cheng Yen.' Now please go to the ceremony immediately."

The moment I received my dharma name, I swore that I would give my whole life to Buddhism and all living beings. Three years later I established the Tzu Chi Foundation in eastern Taiwan. I knew that if I really wanted to do something meaningful in this world, I would most certainly encounter many difficulties. That turned out to be true. But no matter what kind of difficulty I met, the Mentor's instruction, "Be committed to Buddhism and all living beings," would pop into my mind and give me the courage to persevere.

A moment of eternity

On April 20 this year, we happily celebrated the Mentor's 100th birthday in Hualien. Sadly, one month later, on May 20, he was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). He had been ailing and feeble for some time, and he spent most of the time in the ICU asleep.

On the night of May 24, the Mentor's breathing became irregular, his blood pressure plunged, and his heart rate dropped to 50 beats per minute. The doctors said his condition was unstable, but the next day, his heart rate, blood pressure, and other physiological readings returned to normal.

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