

## The Power of the Unspoken

Written by Rey-Sheng Her  
Thursday, 23 November 2006 00:00

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Master Cheng Yen encourages us to cultivate ourselves so that everyone will take delight in seeing us and enjoy our company.

Not long after I joined Tzu Chi, a judge I knew exhibited a lot of curiosity, and some bewilderment, about our foundation. To help her understand, I provided an elaborate explanation. After listening, she admitted she had a clearer understanding of Tzu Chi. But then she added something which, though embarrassing at the moment, has stuck with me. She said, "Mr. Her, I feel that your explanation is quite reasonable, yet the joy or bliss that I would expect to feel when listening to talks on Buddhism is missing."

Her perceptive remark deeply impressed me, and I have often thought of the wisdom in that statement. Reasoning, however brilliant and sound, pales before compassion emanating from the heart. Her remark helped me realize that it is not words but the things that are unspoken that move people.

I think of Master Cheng Yen when I mention the power to move people without words. Many who meet the Master for the first time feel an inexplicable nervousness, but at the same time find the meeting an unspeakably moving experience. Whether the Master utters a few words or no words at all, the compassionate aura she exudes always touches a deep chord in the hearts of those around her.

In October 2002, I invited Dr. Leland H. Hartwell, a 2001 Nobel laureate in medicine, to Hualien to meet with Master Cheng Yen. I was to serve as his interpreter. It was lunchtime when he arrived, so he joined us for a buffet lunch set out in a meeting room at the Hualien Tzu Chi Medical Center. Master Cheng Yen walked in just as Dr. Hartwell was selecting his fare. Though they sat next to each other at the table, they didn't have a chance to talk before a welcome video was presented.

At the end of the video, Dr. Hartwell was asked to say a few words. As he was about to talk, he appeared to be choking back sobs. Tears filled his eyes and ran down his cheeks. Why would an internationally renowned scholar in medicine be so emotionally moved by Master Cheng Yen, with whom he hadn't yet exchanged even a word?

A similar scene occurred when Dr. C. James Peters, the world-famous virologist, visited Master Cheng Yen at the Jing Si Abode in Hualien in 2003. He was the hero portrayed in the movie *Outbreak* who helped thwart a deadly epidemic. Dr. Peters and the Master had a lunch meeting that lasted less than half an hour, during which they did not have much of a chance to talk. After the meal, the Master presented gifts to him and his wife. When he received a Buddhist rosary from the Master, tears also rolled down his cheeks.

Like Dr. Hartwell, Dr. Peters had undoubtedly traveled the world and met countless people and dignitaries of all types. What was it about being in the presence of Master Cheng Yen that moved them both to the point of tears?

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Obviously, the two renowned scientists were moved not by words, but by the unspeakable power and force that only noble characters can project. That was why Ahronglong Sakinu, an indigenous Taiwanese writer, exclaimed, “Today, I witness a Great Life!” when he met Master Cheng Yen for the first time.



When we encounter a “Great Life,” we feel a great spiritual joy. We return to a state that is free of all worldly troubles, pretensions, and painful memories. Our pure and untainted nature is awakened and we are allowed to see our truest self. This meeting with our truest self brings us such joy that tears spring to our eyes.

In the pursuit of success and worldly gains, many of us allow ourselves to be led astray by distorted values. We stoop to lies and we oppress others to get what we want. Our lives are filled with unnecessary complexity and conflicting values. Master Cheng Yen, however, shows us that life can be so simple, so brave, so compassionate. The strength she emanates is beyond words to describe—it is something that one can perceive only through a humble and gentle heart. This is what Sakinu described as a “Great Life.”

However sophisticated or worldly a person may appear, the Master faces him or her with the same simplicity and compassion. Because of that, she is able to bring out everyone’s innate goodness. She is like a spotless mirror: so clear that people see in her their own inborn pure nature. Because she faces us with such a pure, ingenuous self, we are moved to present our purest and most ingenuous side to her.

Ordinarily, we tend to keep our guard up when dealing with others. We are afraid that others may have axes to grind or have ulterior motives. As a result, we cannot face them with the same purity of heart as the Master. If our hearts were clear and untainted, like the Master’s, we would be able to see everyone in their innate state of purity and naiveté.

An analogy can be made between our heart and a lake. If a lake is clear and undisturbed, the clouds reflected in it will be white and clean. However, if a lake is murky, the reflected clouds appear tainted and soiled, even though they may be as white as snow.

The Master once told a story from the time of the Buddha. A bird was flying over the Buddha and his assembly of disciples as they walked on the ground. The bird first saw the disciple Sariputra, who was known to be highly cultivated. However, the bird chose to settle on the Buddha. The bird shunned Sariputra because it could sense sharp edges and ego within him, but the Buddha’s mercy, purity of heart, and dignified serenity drew the feathered creature to him.

The Master used the tale of the bird to urge us to get rid of any trace of arrogance, aggression, and fierceness so that the very sight of us inspires joy. She encourages us to cultivate ourselves so that everyone—and ultimately all beings—will take delight in seeing us and enjoy

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The story about the Buddha and the bird, and the encounters between the Master, Drs. Hartwell and Peters, and Ahronglong Sakinu, clearly point out the way for our spiritual cultivation. Let us turn the epiphany we had while meeting the Master into an abiding source of inspiration and unearth our true, innate nature and hold on to it. Let us diligently cultivate ourselves so that all impurities and confusion are obliterated from our minds and our hearts are filled with love, wisdom, and compassion. When we have done that, a bird may even come to perch on our shoulder with ease and serenity.

By Rey-Sheng Her

Translated by Roger Yu