



## Buddhism and Modern Society



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Dear Venerable De Yuan, Dear CEO Yen Bo-Wen, Dear Professor Rey Her, Dear Tzu Chi member all over the world, and distinguished colleagues both from Yin-Cheng partner universities and other institutions

It gives me great pleasure to witness the launch of the Yin Cheng Distinguished Lectures Series on Buddhism. I want to express my profound gratitude to Venerable Cheng Yen and the members of the Tzu Chi foundation, especially professor Rey Her for their foresight and generosity in supporting this unique and unprecedented collaborative project between the academic world and religious community.

More than two thousand years ago, Buddha Śākyamuni attained the realization and revealed the truth to the world. But as Buddha's teaching spread, even though the core remained intact, its external forms changed in accordance with the world. Now, facing the challenges of the 21st century, how could Buddhism adapt? This is a question that needs to be seriously considered by both Buddhists and academics.

Even in Indian Buddhism, personal salvation and world salvation made up the two sacred pillars - one could not do without the other. After Buddhism spread to China, and for almost a millennium, Chinese Buddhists have upheld this dual cause. However, observing the medieval history, especially the transitional period from the Tang to the Song Dynasty, we could see that Buddhists were increasingly losing its willingness to engage in the world. Under the pressure from both secular regimes and Confucian thinkers, Chinese Buddhism relocated itself from the urban centers to





the remote mountains, and gave away its universalist outlook to a self-contained existence. During the Ming and Qing Dynasty, Buddhism's reputation declined further.

During the end of the Qing Dynasty and the early Republican era, the situation took a different turn. Master Tai Xu and Humanistic Buddhism (Renjian fojiao 人間佛教) that he represented, brought Chinese Buddhism onto the international stage. This spirit was then inherited by Master Yin Shun and Master Cheng Yen. In our own days, the Tzu Chi Foundation and its volunteers followed the footsteps and are always among the first to arrive at a disaster zone. Their actions are the silent but perfect embodiment of the Buddhist humanistic concern. In this sense, Tzu Chi Foundation represents a return to the earlier form of Buddhism and now it shows a way forward for Buddhism tomorrow.

Buddhism is cosmopolitan in its nature. It originated in Central India, but quickly spread across Central Asia and all the way to China, and further to the entire Chinese cultural sphere. In the late modern period, as European colonial forces expanded, Buddhism entered the horizon of the Westerners, and thereafter spread in Europe, North America and around the world. We could thus say that international outlook and ambition is encoded in the genes of Buddhism.

After a millennium-long self-isolation and following the Opium War in 1840, Chinese Buddhism started to re-open its horizon and some Chinese visionaries turned their gaze towards the world, such as Master Tai Xu. He not only brought Buddhism far afield, but also intended to create several institutions in China that promoted the teaching of Japanese, Tibetan and Pali languages. His global vision was later inherited by masters who came after him, as well as by the Tzu Chi Foundation. The Foundation not only has branches reaching all around the world, but also joins in a range of causes, including charity, medical care, disaster relief, education, environmental protection, etc. This international character of the Tzu Chi Foundation is a return to the earliest Buddhist tradition, and is a direct inheritance of the spirit of Master Tai Xu.





Buddhism, since its origin in India, has been a religion that emphasizes education. Before their destruction, the Nalanda University and the Vikramshila University were among the most famous and resourceful institutions of higher education. Similarly, in Chinese Buddhism, the monastic education was a main avenue for commoners to breach social classes, and for the knowledge to circulate. Furthermore, as Buddhist elites interacted with intellectual elites, Buddhism was able to keep refining its own theoretical and practical systems. In a sense, we could say that a factor contributing to the prosperity of Buddhism is its connection with higher education.

Today, the Tzu Chi Foundation possesses its own complete education system, and collaborates with the most prestigious universities around the world. In this sense, the fact that we are being here together today, reflects our shared spiritual inheritance of Master Tai Xu, Master Yin Shun and Master Cheng Yen. Looking ahead, we shall re-discover the Buddhist connection with the society, with the world, and with the academia. Thankfully, what we have come to accomplish today has long been featured in the visionary blueprint drawn by the Tzu Chi Foundation and Master Cheng Yen. Therefore, we shall persist in our return to the original Buddhist aspiration and continue deepening the collaboration between the Buddhist religion and the academic world.

Thank you all !

