



The Life of Master Hsing Yun

Buddhism in Every Step (H1)
(英文版)

Venerable Master Hsing Yun

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International Translation Center

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Written by
Fo Guang Shan
International Translation Center

Edited and proofread by
Fo Guang Shan
International Translation Center

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The Life of Master Hsing Yun

I. Remembering the Buddha

Master Hsing Yun looked over the sea of supporters to the magnificent, golden Buddha statue. Today was the grand opening of the Buddha Memorial Center, an endeavor which had taken nearly fifteen years and the hard work of over one million volunteers and donors to realize.

The elaborate pagoda before him contained a tooth relic of Sakyamuni Buddha, the awakened sage who, over 2,500 years ago, discovered the path to freedom and lasting happiness, founding the religion to which Hsing Yun dedicated himself over seventy years ago. That decision to become a Buddhist monk had brought him here, together with an assembly from around the world of different walks of life, different religions, and different schools of Buddhism to honor the Buddha together.

Hsing Yun had a talent for bringing people together. “When all is said and done, people who worship any god can also say that they believe in Buddhism,” Hsing Yun said, “while those who are true to their faith need not reject those who meander between different religions. It’s the same for a person fond of literature, who can also be fond of philosophy. There’s no need to brush aside anybody’s faith.”

The tooth relic of the Buddha, around which the Buddha Memorial Center blossomed, was a gift. Kunga Dorje Rinpoche, a Tibetan monastic, had salvaged the relic from his home monastery before it was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Upon meeting Hsing Yun in India, the aged monk entrusted it to Hsing Yun with the hopes that he would one day build a pagoda to house it. The Buddha Memorial Center now spans eight-hundred meters and contains a multitude of shrines, museums, and other facilities. The day of the grand opening had finally come.

Hsing Yun addressed the crowd:

“The Buddha Memorial Center is the result of the efforts from a thousand temples and a million supporters. Before starting this project, I was asked, ‘What are the principles behind the Buddha Memorial Center?’ I said, ‘We should have a mind that is selfless.’ This center does not belong to any individual. It belongs to the Buddha; it belongs to

all people everywhere. It belongs to history and to culture.”

Hsing Yun continued, his speech punctuated by applause. At the age of 85, he had been able to realize so many of his life’s goals and, with the Buddha Memorial Center, hoped that the Buddhist teachings would continue to benefit all sentient beings for generations to come, as they had first touched him decades earlier.

II. The Path to the Monastery

The boy who would grow to become Master Hsing Yun was born Li Guoshen on August 19th, 1927, the third of four children. The Li family lived in a small rural village in the Jiangdu region of Jiangsu Province. Outside the city of Nanjing, most families farmed the salty, inhospitable soil for their livelihood. Mr. Li, Hsing Yun’s father, operated a humble incense business and bequeathed a strong work ethic and sense of industriousness to his son. Hsing Yun developed a love of reading and learning from his mother, who was bedridden and in poor health for much of Hsing Yun’s childhood. He read Chinese classics to his mother by her bedside while she corrected his mistakes word by word.

Hsing Yun’s childhood home in Jiangsu Province was situated just west of Xiannu Temple. Jiangsu has

long been a center of Chinese Buddhist culture and devotion, with many of the most eminent monastics and sacred temples arising from its soil. Buddhist values permeated the Li family, but the most devout was Hsing Yun's grandmother. Hsing Yun recalled trying to emulate his grandmother, a strict vegetarian since age 18, "My sister and I were raised under her wing. The two of us would try to outlast one another as strict vegetarians. I was three or four then and completely unaware of the Buddhist teachings underlying vegetarianism."

Though Hsing Yun's grandmother was illiterate, she was able to chant lengthy Buddhist scriptures such as *The Diamond Sutra* and *The Amitabha Sutra* from memory. It was also his grandmother who first introduced Hsing Yun to meditation, rising every morning before the sun came up to sit in the lotus position and attend to her breathing.

Even as a young child, Hsing Yun was sensitive and caring. Though his family was poor, he would share whatever small treats he had to give. His elder sister recalled that at the age of three, he would take the family's candy container, still too heavy for him to lift, and drag it into the center of the village to share with the other neighborhood children.

Hsing Yun was born during a turbulent time in China's history. The Qing dynasty had fallen, and China was slowly reunified through violent conflict

between the Chinese Nationalist Army and local warlords. In 1937, when Hsing Yun was ten, the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out, and the fighting was fierce and frequent. Hsing Yun recalled, “The boom of artillery and fighting in the streets and alleys were everywhere, as was the unnerving sight of corpses on the pavement. On one occasion, I saved a wounded soldier by alerting adults to move to the rear on a broken down door. Fleeing danger, I even hid myself among the dead.”

It was in this same year that Master Hsing Yun’s father departed for a routine business trip to Nanjing. Months turned to years, and the family began to fall deeper into poverty. Unsure if he was living or dead, Mrs. Li set out with her son in search of her husband’s whereabouts. Mrs. Li would never discover exactly what befell her husband, though it is likely he was one of the countless civilians killed during the Nanjing Massacre. However, their trip would produce one of the defining moments of her son’s life. Hsing Yun recounts what happened:

“Midway to Nanjing, we bumped into the Japanese army practicing their drills. As I was gazing intently at the scene, I was approached by a monk who was one of the receptionists at Qixia Monastery. Probably thinking I looked cute with my round cheeks and big ears, he casually asked whether I would be

willing to become a monk. Out of instinct, I quickly replied, ‘I’m willing!’”

Master Zhikai, the abbot of Qixia Monastery, was nearby and quickly heard of the young boy’s intention. The receptionist monk returned with a reply from the abbot: “I’ve heard that you would like to leave home to become a monk. I will be your master!”

Hsing Yun had long been drawn to the monastic life and admired the dignity and peace he felt from the monastics who passed through his village. On one occasion, at the age of ten, he was similarly invited to ordain as a monastic by a visiting monk. However, on that occasion, before agreeing, the young Hsing Yun asked, “Can my mama go too?”

“No,” the monk answered.

“What about my grandma? Can she come with me?”

“No.”

“What about my sister?”

The monk denied his request once again.

“Then I don’t wanna go!”

But this time was different. Hsing Yun had agreed and saw his words as a promise, a commitment that he needed to keep. He pleaded with his mother to let him go. Despite her sorrow, she finally assented.

Mrs. Li started her journey to find her husband, but would return without even her son. Later when

Hsing Yun asked his mother how she could bring herself to allow him to go on what seemed to be an impulsive decision, she explained to him, “I felt that you were a promising child, but our family was poor. We did not have the ability to give you any opportunity for education. If you were able to make progress in your Buddhist studies, then perhaps you would be better off there rather than staying with me.”

Hsing Yun returned with the receptionist monk to Qixia Monastery. Soon he underwent the “tonsure” ceremony: his head was shaved, and he donned monastic robes for the first time. Hsing Yun’s life as a novice monastic had begun.

III. Entering Monastic Life

Qixia Monastery was unlike the small, local temples that Hsing Yun had visited in the past. Qixia was a large training monastery, which housed hundreds of monastics who traveled great distances to study the Buddha’s teachings in-depth and ardently practice meditation. Life was scheduled and regimented, and discipline was strict. All resident monastics had chores or other manual labor to perform in addition to attending morning and evening chanting services. Meals were meager and coarse, consisting of thin, watery rice gruel, tofu remnants, and dried turnips.

Life in the monastery was difficult, especially for a young novice monk like Hsing Yun. He lacked wealthy benefactors to support him, and he was not old enough to earn money by performing funeral rites. He survived on the barest of necessities. When his robe became tattered, he would mend it. When the soles of his shoes wore through, he would line them with cardboard. Even when Hsing Yun was able to find some paper scraps to write home, his letters remained unsent because he could not afford postage.

Hsing Yun's teacher was Master Zhikai, the abbot of the monastery. Zhikai was peculiar insofar as he did not use his position to ordain many disciples. Though the many residents of Qixia Monastery were under his leadership, Hsing Yun was his only direct disciple. Nevertheless, Hsing Yun received no special treatment and was subject to the same strict discipline as all the resident monastics at Qixia Monastery.

Hsing Yun remembered his teacher fondly, "To me, Master Zhikai's excellence lay not only in his strict discipline and profound insight, but also in his magnanimity, open-mindedness, and intellectual outlook. In China and Taiwan, in monasteries and local temples, I have often seen monastics acquire disciples merely for the sake of their own selfish interests. For example, they sought personal attendants

to serve them when they grew old, or the right person to inherit their family shrine, or provisions for their temples, or an ego boost. Whatever their intentions, they were not in the disciples' interest. But my teacher, the great Venerable Master Zhikai, had only my interests in mind."

If anything, Zhikai was more strict with his own disciple than with the other resident monastics of Qixia Monastery. Each year, during the Lunar New Year celebrations, the monastic residents would request leave from the monastery to return to their hometowns and visit their families. These requests were summarily granted. Hsing Yun's requests, on the other hand, were routinely denied.

But beyond the observance of strict discipline and monastic forms, Zhikai was deeply compassionate and had a humanitarian outlook that he passed on to his disciple. Hsing Yun frequently recounted the judgment and leadership of his teacher following the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, when Zhikai converted the monastery into a refugee camp:

"Once it was known that there was food at the monastery, several hundred thousand refugees began to make their way to it," Hsing Yun recalled, "As this huge number of people began pouring in, the monks and workers at the monastery were overwhelmed by the enormity of their needs and their suffering.

Everybody was cold, and many people were starving. Before long, the monastery completely ran out of its normal food stores. Master Zhikai said, ‘In the granary, we still have over two thousand pounds of soy beans. The beans are supposed to be used as offerings on the first and fifteenth of every month, but why don’t we use them to make soup for these poor people instead?’”

“When one of the monks at the monastery heard Master Zhikai’s suggestion, his eyes flared up with annoyance. He said, ‘We’ve already given them everything we have. We don’t need to give them the last of our soy beans, too!’ Master Zhikai responded quite heatedly, ‘Saving one life is more valuable than saving a whole monastery. As Buddhists, we must be willing to sacrifice everything. This is one of those times when we must give up all that we have to help others.’”

After living at Qixia Monastery as a novice for three years, Zhikai felt that his disciple was ready to take full ordination. This involved learning and submitting to the 250 *bhikṣu* precepts, the rules laid down by the Buddha governing the behavior of monastics, as well as the bodhisattva precepts and other rules of monastic decorum. The preparatory training to submit oneself for full ordination was a grueling series of classes and practice, lasting fifty-three days.

During the period of ordination training, the already stringent discipline of Qixia Monastery was escalated to unreasonable heights, and those who broke the rules would be beaten with willow twigs by their preceptors. Aimed at humbling those seeking ordination and breaking their sense of ego, there was often nothing that could be done to avoid a beating.

“Once the preceptor asked me if I had ever killed any sentient beings,” Hsing Yun remembered, “I answered, ‘No!’ and suddenly was struck with a willow branch. ‘You haven’t even killed any mosquitoes or ants?’ I was questioned. I quickly changed my answer and admitted, ‘Yes, I have killed sentient beings,’ I was then struck again because killing sentient beings is breaking one of the precepts.”

“The preceptor then asked if my teacher had told me to come to be ordained. I answered, ‘No, I came on my own.’ I was then struck a third time, ‘Your master didn’t tell you to come? So you just do things on your own? That deserves punishment!’ I accepted the beating humbly and said, ‘Yes, it was my master who told me to come.’ The preceptor then shouted, ‘So if he had not told you to come, you would not have done so?’ I was then struck a fourth time.”

After emerging from the fifty-three day ordination, a number of avenues were now open to Hsing Yun. He could spend his life performing chanting ceremonies and funerary rites, he could jockey for

an administrative position at Qixia or another large monastery like it, he could try to establish a temple of his own, or engage in one of the other many possible careers for a Buddhist monastic. Given his own inclination and the financial and emotional support of his master, Zhikai, Hsing Yun pursued further education at some of the finest Buddhist seminaries in China.

The Buddhist seminary was a relatively new and changing institution within Chinese Buddhism. At such seminaries, groups of monastics would study Buddhist scriptures and philosophy in-depth in a classroom environment while also engaging in periods of intensive Buddhist practice. In addition to traditional Buddhist scholarship, many of the more modern seminaries offered an extended curriculum that included subjects such as history, literature, science, psychology, and instruction on various classical and modern languages.

Hsing Yun studied at a number of different institutions, but by far the most significant and influential was the Jiaoshan Buddhist Seminary. Hsing Yun enrolled in 1945 when Master Xuefan was chancellor of the school. Xuefan, along with many of the teachers at the school, was highly influenced by Master Taixu, a leading Buddhist reformer who taught, wrote, and traveled extensively, promoting the ideals that Buddhism must adapt to the modern era to remain relevant to the needs of modern people.

Taixu inspired a generation of monastics with the rallying cry that “The future of the nation is the responsibility of every citizen, and the future of Buddhism is the responsibility of every monastic.” Hsing Yun flourished at Jiaoshan, and it was in this innovative, reform-minded environment that his own vision for the future of Buddhism began to take shape.

Hsing Yun began to express his vision of Buddhist reform through writing. With the encouragement of his teachers at Jiaoshan Buddhist Seminary, Hsing Yun began to publish his essays and articles in local newspapers as well as Buddhist periodicals and magazines. In time, Hsing Yun would even partner with one of his classmates, Master Zhiyon, to found and edit their own Buddhist magazine entitled *Raging Billows*.

Hsing Yun’s early writings are broad, but there are a number of consistent themes. One is an appreciation for traditional Buddhist ceremonies, but also dismay at the many superstitious elements that are so often intermingled among them. Another is an extreme distaste for the commercialization of Buddhism, and the abuse of the piety of Buddhist laypersons to line the pockets of a few unscrupulous monastics.

After he completed his studies in 1947, Zhikai asked Hsing Yun to help develop Dajue Temple, the

temple where Zhikai himself was tonsured. Hsing Yun arrived with a two part plan: develop Buddhist education by founding a school and develop the temple economically by creating temple farms. However, the escalation of the violence between the Chinese Nationalists and the Communists kept these plans from coming to fruition. Hsing Yun remembered:

“When I graduated from Jiaoshan at age twenty-one, my sole preoccupation was to promote a Buddhist revival through education and economics. I wanted to create new schools and farms. But while I was principal of Baita Elementary School, there were mass burnings and looting everywhere. The nearby region was restless, and it was almost impossible to set up a teaching program there. Of course, the farming plan was nipped in the bud. Two years later, I quit and left for Nanjing, a prosperous city with a diverse population.”

“Although the civil chaos was discouraging, things were not completely hopeless. Venerable Yinyun recommended me to head to Huacang Temple. Subsequently, I founded a school and a bookstore. I established monastic rules and regulations for the temple. With my eagerness to promote Buddhism and save society, I was confident that I would make a difference. I could not know that in the winter of 1948, with the Nationalist army in retreat, all my plans would vanish in the smoke and debris of civil war.”

As the chaos surrounding Hsing Yun and the nation mounted, and the Communists continued to gain power, millions of people, including a generation of Buddhist monastics, began leaving the mainland to seek refuge on the island of Taiwan. From this migration came a series of events which would forever change the course of Buddhism.

IV. Crossing the Sea to Taiwan

Hsing Yun spent his last night in China on the road. Earlier that evening, he had traveled to Qixia Monastery for Master Zhikai's advice and consent before departing on a special voyage: Hsing Yun had joined a group of monastics determined to act as a relief team in the ever-growing violence between the Nationalists and the Communists. A steam ship was leaving for Taiwan from Shanghai the next day, and Hsing Yun was planning to assemble the team and leave the mainland.

The monastic relief team was recruited over the previous months by Zhiyong, Hsing Yun's classmate and partner on *Raging Billows*. While the group garnered many volunteers, they had not yet organized or deployed. As the Communists took Nanjing and the situation appeared more dire, Zhiyong and Hsing Yun made a pact: the two would separate so that they would not perish together. Zhiyong would remain

in China and do his best to protect Buddhism, while Hsing Yun would lead the monastic relief team to Taiwan.

Zhikai agreed that the time was right and prepared a hearty meal as a send-off for his only disciple. Zhikai gave Hsing Yun two silver dollars in case of emergency, and sent him off on the road to nearby Tianning Temple to assemble the team. Although he did not know at the time, Hsing Yun would never again see his master.

Arriving at Tianning in the dead of night, Hsing Yun began to wake the monastics and alert them that now was the time to go. Of the over one hundred monastics who volunteered to be a part of the monastic relief team, only 70 made it to Shanghai. The group would encounter further difficulties once arriving in Taiwan.

In 1949 and for many years to come, anti-Communist paranoia was high, and Buddhist monastics were seen by some in the Nationalist government as an unknown quantity. There were even persistent rumors that a cadre of communist spies had traveled to Taiwan disguised as monks. This mistrust led to a breakup of the monastic relief group, with some participating monastics thrown in jail and others placed under house arrest.

“I, along with Venerable Cihang and some twenty other monastics from the mainland, was locked up

in a cell so jammed that we could not lie down but stood there for days and nights on end,” Hsing Yun recalled. “All of us were tied and bound. Espionage was punishable by death, but my mind, in serenity, remained quite free from delusion. I was prepared to confront the worst. Twenty-three days later, however, we were released—thanks to the endeavors of [government insiders] Wu Jingxiong, Sunzhang Jinyang, and others.”

When the dust settled, Hsing Yun and the remaining monastics who had not fled or disobeyed were left to fend for themselves.

Hsing Yun spent the next several weeks wandering up and down the island of Taiwan looking for a place to stay. The temples in Taiwan were already overcrowded, and with food and funds in short supply, outsiders like Hsing Yun were often turned away.

Hsing Yun remembered, “At the time, the war in Mainland China had aroused widespread panic, and many monastics were fleeing the country. Within the Buddhist circle, the confidence of young monks and nuns was shaken—temples would not accept monastics from other places. It was impossible to rely on the Buddhist community for survival.”

Hsing Yun was turned away again and again from temples in Taipei, Taichung, and every place he found in-between. On one occasion, Hsing Yun

recalled: "I arrived at Shandao Temple to see fifteen or sixteen people around a dinner table for eight. Knowingly, I left in silence." It was raining that night. Cold and wet, Hsing Yun took refuge from the rain by sleeping outside underneath the temple's bell.

By relying on friends and classmates, Hsing Yun was able to take in a meal here or there or request a few days' lodging as he wandered across the island. But more often than not, following his initial arrival in Taiwan, Hsing Yun spent his days homeless and hungry. It was not until the kind welcome of Master Miaoguo that Hsing Yun gained the security of a permanent home.

Miaoguo was the abbot of Yuanguang Temple and a native of Taiwan. His leadership persisted through Taiwan's own shifting political and religious landscape. Before returning to the Chinese at the conclusion of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the island suffered under fifty years of Japanese colonial rule. Changes in Japanese policy toward Buddhism meant that temple land ownership as well as the Japanese policy toward Chinese language and culture were in constant flux. Taiwanese Buddhism was decentralized, and practices such as vegetarianism and monastic celibacy varied from temple to temple. Taiwanese Buddhism was also deeply syncretic, with the average person drawing no distinctions between Buddhism, Daoism, and folk religion. Through it

all, Miaoguo maintained a dedication to traditional Buddhist monasticism and adherence to the precepts, and he ensured that education was given primary importance at Yuanguang Temple.

Hsing Yun felt deep gratitude to finally have a home and repaid Miaoguo by working tirelessly, volunteering for the most difficult jobs. Every day, Hsing Yun would draw 600 buckets of water from the temple well, journey to the market to buy and haul back supplies, cook and serve meals, sweep and clean the temple grounds, and handle the temple mail and correspondence. Through hard work and dedication, Hsing Yun began to ingratiate himself with Miaoguo, the residents of Yuanguang Temple, and the wider Buddhist community.

Hsing Yun became Miaoguo's protégé, accompanying him as he traveled and taught throughout Taiwan. During this time, Hsing Yun began to form connections with prominent leaders in the Taiwanese Buddhist community. He recalled, "Venerable Miaoguo recommended me to the elders of the Buddhist community. . . . It was a great honor to be associated with them."

These new friendships helped facilitate Hsing Yun's ambitious plans for the expansion of Buddhism to come, but of all the people whom Hsing Yun met, the one who would spell the greatest change in his life was a Buddhist layperson named Li Juehe.

While Buddhism established itself in Taiwan generations earlier, the average Taiwanese monastic had little knowledge of Buddhist doctrine and philosophy, for they were only equipped with enough scriptural knowledge to perform ceremonies and offer blessings. Li Juehe and others were looking for an educated monastic who could come and teach in Taiwan's rural northeastern city of Ilan, and Hsing Yun readily agreed.

In Ilan, at a small structure named Leiyin Temple, Hsing Yun gave his first guest lecture series on the "Universal Gate" chapter of *The Lotus Sutra*, which describes the great Buddhist sage Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, who vows to help all sentient beings in need by transforming into whatever physical form they need most. Soon he would return to Leiyin Temple to stay.

Five years earlier, Hsing Yun had arrived in Taiwan penniless and homeless. Now he was primed to begin a Buddhist revolution, the effects of which continue to this day.

V. Arrival at Leiyin Temple

Today, Ilan is somewhat removed from the populous western coast of Taiwan, but in the 1950s it was even more remote. Travel to Ilan from Taipei required crossing through Taiwan's central mountain range

on twisting, often dangerous roads. One particular thoroughfare is nicknamed *jiuwan shibagua* (九彎十八拐), “Nine curves and eighteen hairpin turns,” with the entire journey requiring several arduous hours. Additionally, Ilan was culturally reclusive, and the people were wary of outsiders. Hsing Yun would need to earn their trust.

At Leiyin Temple, Hsing Yun would now have the opportunity to put into practice the ideal he learned from Master Zhikai of putting people first and the reform-minded spirit imparted to him at Jiaoshan Buddhist Seminary. Hsing Yun wanted to show people that Buddhism is about our world right now, not only about the next life and the affairs of ghosts and spirits. He felt that Buddhism should benefit society and bring people joy, instead of being dour and isolated. Rather than being old-fashioned and stale, Buddhism should adapt itself to modern times and the needs of individuals. Hsing Yun called his approach “Humanistic Buddhism,” and would expend boundless energy to actualize these dreams.

Hsing Yun began by observing and understanding the people around him. Due to a generation of turmoil, schooling was not always available to the people of Ilan, and many were illiterate. In response, Hsing Yun started the “Ilan Buddhist Chanting Association” at the temple to allow devotees to express their piety,

while also building the congregation's reading skills through chanting Buddhist texts line by line.

Hsing Yun realized the importance of making Buddhism relevant to young people. In the hopes of bringing more young men and women into the temple, Hsing Yun started a Buddhist choir. He wrote the lyrics to the songs himself and asked Yang Yungpo, a local high school teacher, to compose the melodies. The choir was very successful, and the group later published their performance on a set of six records.

Hsing Yun's teachings themselves were also markedly different in their energy and aplomb. He offered Dharma talks at Leiyin Temple twice a week, but also roamed the countryside with his young volunteers, bringing Buddhism to outdoor venues and public places—anywhere that people gathered.

“In the 1950s, not only was life in Taiwan materially deprived, but it was like a desert wanting of the Dharma,” Hsing Yun remembered. “I resolved to sprinkle the sweet dew of the Dharma everywhere and reach out to the populace. With a group of resolute young people, we propagated the Dharma across the land with pioneering spirits. We left footprints all over the countryside, villages and towns, city streets and back alleys, temples and theaters, beaches and mountains.”

“We wired electricity, fixed light bulbs, tuned microphones, laid out benches and stools, put up

posters, and summoned audiences before taking the stage. Though few in number came to listen, we were never downhearted because if only one person would come, then one more person would be receiving the benefits of the Dharma. Often no one would show up at a lecture. I would start as usual, and it was after a long while that audiences gradually appeared. Later, people generally became punctual, and audiences became progressively larger.”

Hsing Yun formulated his speaking engagements to draw people in and interest the disinterested. For example, before he took the podium to speak, his talks would often begin with a performance by the Buddhist choir. Lyrics to the songs were written on a cloth hung near the performers so that curious on-lookers would be drawn in closer to read them. Next, a slide presentation accompanied by music would begin. By the time Hsing Yun was ready to begin speaking, many who would have only watched at a distance were now filling the seats, and Hsing Yun would keep them engaged with an interesting and lively talk on the Buddha’s teachings.

Hsing Yun’s enthusiasm and the accessibility of his teachings started to earn him a growing congregation. Though the people of Ilan were conservative and initially skeptical of Hsing Yun as an outsider, many became his most fervent and dedicated supporters and would stand by him for decades to come.

Several of the young people who entered the doors of Leiyin Temple to chant, sing, or learn about writing would one day become Hsing Yun's first monastic disciples.

“During my first years in Ilan, I organized a variety of Buddhist activities to attract many young people. Those who found excuses to avoid regular chanting services and Buddhist lectures would gladly join the choir and the reading sessions. Some advised me to quit sponsoring these activities. They said, ‘These young people came to have fun singing or to improve their reading skills, not to strengthen their Buddhist faith.’

“I thought that even if this is true, I would still gladly oblige. However, many of those youngsters, such as Tzu Hui, Tzu Jung, and Tzu Chia, became Buddhists and then leading monastics. *The Diamond Sutra* says, ‘That which is called a notion of phenomena is not a notion of phenomena, and so it is called a notion of phenomena.’ Music and songs, if done skillfully, will not lose their essence.”

In 1959, five years after coming to Ilan, Hsing Yun had another novel idea: to celebrate the Buddha's birthday, the most important holiday of the Buddhist calendar, he would organize a lantern procession throughout Ilan. Hsing Yun and his supporters journeyed to all forty-eight districts in the county, and each contributed a float to the parade. At that time,

the population of Ilan was roughly 50,000 people. That year, on the evening of the Buddha's birthday, over 30,000 people turned out to march or watch as the parade of lanterns and brightly lit floats curled around the countryside.

Hsing Yun's efforts to spread Humanistic Buddhism to the people of Ilan had been a success. Not only was he able to rekindle the spirit of Buddhism in that remote part of Taiwan, but he unified the Buddhist community. He engendered a new generation of passionate supporters, both monastic and lay, eager to promote and share the benefits that the Buddha's teachings can bring to our lives and to society. He was building a movement, and soon they would move forward.

VI. Fo Guang Shan

Master Hsing Yun emerged from a forest of thorny brambles and towering, thick bamboo, his robe stained up to the collar with red mud and weeds. Yet he carried a giant, shining smile on his face while greeting the tour bus full of his waiting devotees. They wondered what had possessed Hsing Yun to take such interest in this remote, uncultivated, and undulating land. "My apologies! I've made you wait so long," Hsing Yun exclaimed as he grabbed a handkerchief to wipe his sweat-drenched brow.

Hsing Yun's followers certainly had reason to doubt his calm, confident smile. They had joined him on a rented tour bus to journey along quiet winding roads to this isolated property, an hour out of Kaohsiung City. They worked hard to raise funds to purchase the land for a future monastery, but the land they saw before them seemed distant, desolate, and far from fortuitous.

The year was 1967. A few years earlier, Hsing Yun began traveling regularly to the city of Kaohsiung in southern Taiwan, and his teachings were received enthusiastically. The local people had helped to finance the construction of a small temple, which was housed at Shoushan Buddhist College. Offering a comprehensive Buddhist curriculum in Hsing Yun's Humanistic Buddhism, the school gained students at an astounding rate, and it quickly outgrew its small campus. Hsing Yun began dreaming of building a monastery in southern Taiwan that would be akin to the ancient Chinese training monasteries, which served not only as Buddhist centers, but as places of education and culture.

After the necessary funds were raised, Hsing Yun and his followers first found five acres of land next to the scenic Chengcing Lake. Before closing the deal, one of his disciples commented that the new monastery's proximity to the popular lake would assure a steady flow of tourists, donors, and maybe even

president Chiang Kai-Shek himself, who had recently built a chateau on the lake's shore. Upon hearing that comment, Hsing Yun canceled the plans to buy the property: He wanted a place where people would come out of true devotion to the Buddha's teachings rather than simply another place to visit when going to the lake.

It was that decision which led Hsing Yun to the secluded bamboo thicket. Hsing Yun hoped that his monastery would be a place where students could focus on their studies and their practice; a place not unlike the ancient monasteries of China's sacred mountains. The location would be called Fo Guang Shan, Chinese for "Buddha's Light Mountain."

After the land was purchased and the bamboo began to be cleared, the first phase of construction slowly began in earnest. Those who visit Fo Guang Shan today marvel at the majestic main shrine, which houses grand statues of Sakyamuni Buddha, Amitabha Buddha, and the Medicine Buddha. Visitors must climb hills and many steps, passing through several large gateways before entering the courtyard where the main shrine finally stands majestically before them.

But the main shrine was not the earliest focal point of Fo Guang Shan. Hsing Yun firmly believed in the importance of education, remarking that "Only by ensuring that Buddhist temples become

educationally oriented can we truly achieve the goals of guiding the human mind and serving society.” The first building at Fo Guang Shan would be a seminary, which today is known as Eastern Buddhist College.

The early days of construction were not easy. The monastics and lay followers did all they could to contribute to the construction of the monastery. Hsing Yun’s first monastic disciple, Venerable Hsin Ping, stayed on the land from the beginning of the construction, living in a meager hut with no electricity or running water. Once, when they were pouring cement on a slanted roof and the workers left for the day, the monastics kept working late into the night to finish the job, their work illuminated by a couple of motorbike headlights.

On another occasion, a torrential downpour destroyed a dam, flooding a gully that passed by Eastern Buddhist College and began to erode the soil, threatening to destroy the bridge overhead and send the entire building sliding into the gully. Hsing Yun and the monastics who were living in the seminary’s dormitory jumped into the gushing, muddy waters in an effort to secure the hillside by stacking sandbags, folders, blankets, and whatever else they could find. Finally, the storm broke, and the seminary was saved.

Those early days brought many challenges, but the fruits of their labor began to steadily emerge.

First, Eastern Buddhist College was finished. Then, they built a shrine to Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva called the Great Compassion Hall, as well as a couple of pavilions. Hsing Yun worked daily and often well into the night, ensuring that students could have free lodging, tuition, books, and clothing. More and more students came, and Fo Guang Shan Monastery began to grow exponentially. Thousands of volunteers inspired by Hsing Yun's vision and dedication devoted their time to help manifest the dreams of what this place could be. Fo Guang Shan would soon have a mobile clinic, a high school, an orphanage, an auditorium, and numerous other facilities.

One of the early primary sources of funding for Fo Guang Shan came from the growing popularity of Hsing Yun's writing. He began to be published widely not only in Buddhist magazines and periodicals, but major newspapers as well. He also wrote a number of landmark books for the growing Buddhist culture in Taiwan, including *The Biography of Sakyamuni Buddha*, *The Biography of the Buddha's Ten Great Disciples*, and *National Master Yulin*, a historical fiction novel starring a Chinese monk which became so popular that it was adapted for television and the stage.

Hsing Yun also became known as a calligrapher and would auction off his artwork to fund various projects. One such auction was held to help fund

the construction of a university, and the pieces sold quite well. With one particular piece, after the price rose more and more, someone shouted out a bid for two hundred thousand New Taiwan dollars, which is equal to more than six thousand US dollars. However, a young boy in the audience then waved a bill and shouted out, “one hundred dollars!” Hsing Yun immediately stopped the bidding and pronounced the piece sold. The boy was elated, and the audience broke into applause.

As Hsing Yun’s popularity grew, he entertained a greater variety of speaking engagements, and he began to spread his vision of cultivating people’s hearts and minds through Buddhist-inspired wisdom and virtue. He was the first Buddhist monk to speak on a number of Taiwanese television stations; he spoke at the large National Sun-Yat Sen Memorial Hall and was even invited by Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense to speak to the army and at various prison facilities. Although each of these activities would have been unthinkable when he arrived on the island, after years of effort, his message was being welcomed into mainstream society.

Despite his growing popularity, Hsing Yun consistently stressed the importance of the teachings over the teacher. He knew that if his work was to last for generations to come, he could not become attached to any position. A system would have to be

built that both allowed for others to step into leadership positions and, at the same time, insured that quality leadership could continue to develop. Hsing Yun adopted a style that combined an exceptionally structured set of governing regulations with a personal, nurturing approach to individual relations.

“I have never considered myself great,” Hsing Yun said concerning his disciples, “What matters is that my relationship with my disciples is not one in which I give the orders and they carry them out; rather, it’s more like a meeting of minds, the exchange of experiences on the Buddhist path. I give them patient and systematic guidance and do not coerce them with my authority. . . . This has enabled me to give good counsel and take in a wide range of opinions.”

Early on at Fo Guang Shan, Hsing Yun encouraged his disciples to seek out a broad range of educational opportunities. He paid for his disciples to attain Ph.D.s abroad in fields like education, management, and religious studies. Some people criticized him and said those students would never return. Hsing Yun, however, had confidence, patience, and a fatherly demeanor with all his disciples. He visited those who were abroad, made sure they had what they needed for their studies, and comforted them in times of stress. His patience paid off as those disciples returned, applied their knowledge, and become leaders within Fo Guang Shan.

Hsing Yun and his disciples established a “Religious Affairs Committee” to guide the direction of Fo Guang Shan Monastery into the future. They established a detailed constitution, outlining procedures to guide the rapidly expanding organization into the future. One of the aspects which first surprised people the most was that Hsing Yun insisted on term limits for his own position as abbot and chairperson of the committee. The Religious Affairs Committee was voted in by all monastics in the community who were there at least a few years. Every four years, the committee would then elect their own chairperson who would also serve as the abbot of Fo Guang Shan. The abbot could be reelected by majority vote to a second term and under special cases serve a third term with a two-thirds majority vote.

As Hsing Yun’s term came to an end, his disciples begged him to make a special exception and remain abbot longer. But he was sure the reins needed to be turned over and other leaders needed to develop. A large Dharma transmission ceremony took place on September 22, 1985. Hsing Yun spoke clearly about his reasons for stepping down at the ceremony. His four primary reasons were that rules should be established by law rather than individual people, no one should be deemed indispensable, stepping down is not considered retiring, and replacing previous leadership with new leadership reinvigorates Buddhism.

He reflected on that moment: “For me, being in and out of worldly rank is just like drifting clouds. The more you can let go, the higher and freer you can float. Throughout my entire life, I was never seriously concerned about my own future, for I felt that whatever successes I achieved were the product of certain conditions. . . . Not until one gives up something, can one gain something; and only after the rear foot is raised can one take the next step forward.”

Hsing Yun walked out of the temple and proceeded straight down the half-mile path towards the front gate as the ceremony ended. Disciples and devotees lined the area waving and pleading with him to return soon. He held his smile and strode straight to the gate, and without even returning to his room at the monastery, he bid the people farewell. Nevertheless, it was as he stated: he had stepped down, but he was not retiring. It was now time to take the next step forward. He earnestly trusted his disciples to take on the work at Fo Guang Shan Monastery and wasted not a moment in moving on.

VII. International Buddhism

The audience applause lasted a whole three minutes before Hsing Yun could continue his opening speech. The year was 1988, and Hsing Yun was speaking at the sixteenth conference of the World Fellowship of

Buddhists. At the conference's opening ceremony, with more than five hundred delegates gathered from over thirty countries and all the major schools of Buddhism, Hsing Yun announced the dissolving of contentions and the consensus between the delegates from either side of the Taiwan Strait.

Arranging the conference had been no easy task. Tension between the Chinese Buddhist Associations had a history. At the World Fellowship of Buddhists conference four years earlier, a representative from Taiwan was chosen as vice chair, prompting the withdrawal of the mainland delegates. Then, two years later, under pressure from Beijing, the delegation from Taiwan was completely excluded from the conference.

The delicate matter involved countless negotiations which repeatedly broke down and had to be restarted. Hsing Yun persisted in trying to mend the pain felt by both sides and made many concessions in an attempt to be delicate and politically neutral. The invitations for each delegation and all the labels at the conference purposely excluded mention of country names, identifying participating groups only by association titles. The labels used at the conference for these two reconciling groups were "The Buddhist Association of Beijing, China" and "The Buddhist Association of Taipei, China," skillfully worded titles that both parties could agree with.

The only flags flown at the event were the American flag, representing the host nation, and the flag of the World Fellowship of Buddhists. Following his success at reconciliation, Hsing Yun was named the honorary president of the organization, a designation he holds to this day.

Hsing Yun has sometimes been criticized as a “political monk” by his detractors for his involvement in trying to mediate such affairs. “Over the years, people’s opinions about my mediation efforts have differed,” Hsing Yun recollected. “Some, of course, understand how hard I work and have praised the results. Others said I am too vulgar and have nothing better to do than stick my nose in people’s affairs. Didn’t the Buddha, twenty-five hundred years ago, wander from place to place, frequenting alike the palaces of kings and the hovels of the poor, to resolve conflicts?”

The host site of the conference was California’s Hsi Lai Temple, the first major branch temple of Fo Guang Shan outside of Taiwan. The founding of Hsi Lai Temple also required its own patient mediation and nearly a decade of effort to accomplish.

Hsing Yun traveled to the United States for the first time in 1976 for the country’s bicentennial celebration. Being both inspired by the diverse culture and troubled by the lack of Buddhist facilities for the immigrant Chinese community, Hsing Yun began to

explore the possibility of founding a temple in the United States. He sent two of his disciples, Venerable Tzu Chuang and Venerable Yi Hang, with \$50,000 on an exploratory trip to see if they could purchase a building in Southern California. The property value was much higher than they had anticipated, so Hsing Yun went back to the United States himself to help negotiate the purchase of what would become Baita Temple.

Hsing Yun heard that the small temple's events quickly became extremely popular and overcrowded, so he began thinking about a much larger facility. Thanks to some very generous donations, he was able to purchase land in Hacienda Heights, just east of Los Angeles. The local residents, however, were vehemently opposed to building a Buddhist temple nearby. Buddhism was widely misunderstood, and the residents feared that it would be a negative influence to their children, decrease their property value, and some even worried that people from the temple would eat their pet dogs.

After six public hearings and over one hundred explanatory sessions, Hsing Yun was finally able to build his first major temple in the United States. Difficulties persisted with slanderous hecklers and rock-throwing, but through a concerted effort to develop many community service programs, share funds with local charities, and open up dialog

and cultural events to the local community, Hsi Lai Temple slowly grew into a prized landmark of the city, popular not just for Buddhists, but for many local schools, senior groups, and other citizens as a place to learn about Buddhism and Chinese culture.

Shortly after the founding of Hsi Lai Temple, Hsing Yun began to expand the network of Fo Guang Shan temples internationally and further enfranchise laypersons in the work of learning and promoting Buddhism. In 1991, he founded the Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA), a predominantly lay Buddhist group that provides education and community enrichment and that acts as a support structure to make founding new temples possible. Hsing Yun believed the BLIA would "enable Buddhism to go from the temple and monastery into society and even every single household" and that "devotees can become Buddhist teachers just like the monastics, so they can engage in work that purifies the mind, improves moral conditions, and makes a contribution to society and the nation."

As Hsing Yun began to set his sights on expanding Buddhism internationally, one of the greatest barriers remained his ability to spread Humanistic Buddhism throughout his homeland. However, during the World Fellowship of Buddhists conference, Hsing Yun had befriended Zhao Puchu, president of the Buddhist Association of China, who used the

momentum of the conference to arrange an invitation for Hsing Yun to visit the People's Republic of China (PRC) for the first time since his departure by boat as a young man.

It was a monumental breakthrough for a monk from Taiwan to be invited to the PRC. Since the Republic of China government stationed itself in Taiwan several decades earlier, dialog between the two governments had been poor to non-existent. Hsing Yun arrived on March 27, 1989 with a delegation of over 200 monastics, devotees, journalists, and authors. They were welcomed with much aplomb in every city, touring across the whole country, stopping in Beijing, Shanghai, Dunhuang, and Chengdu.

Hsing Yun's talks drew large crowds wherever he visited. One writer on the delegation reported, "Wherever we went the provincial governor and local mayor would receive us or hold banquets in our honor. Large ranks from the monastic and lay communities would line the streets in welcome regardless of whether we arrived at the airport or the train station, or even if we arrived before dawn."

In Beijing, at that time, Hsing Yun held an audience with Yang Shangkun and Li Xiannian, the current and previous presidents of the PRC respectively. Hsing Yun spoke openly with them about his concerns over the effects of the Cultural Revolution and his views on religious policy. He pleaded with

them, “As communists, religious belief is not of importance to you, but it is to your benefit to at least understand religion.”

Hsing Yun also traveled to Qixia and Jiaoshan monasteries, the monasteries he had lived in as a young man. One of the most emotionally difficult parts of the trip was learning what had become of Master Zhikai, who ordained him so many years ago.

“I learned Master Zhikai was brutalized in the Cultural Revolution and had perished,” Hsing Yun remembered, “There was little else left for me to do except care for his bereaved family. I have no words for the torment he must have been subjected to during his final days when I was nowhere around to attend to his needs or even ask how he was fairing as a pupil should in gratitude for his gracious guidance and everything that he would always mean to me.”

The lectures Hsing Yun gave at each monastery, however, were joyous occasions. Young monastics listened attentively and applauded heartily. At Jiaoshan Monastery, the former teachers who had once been so strict in their treatment of Hsing Yun, insisted he take the seat of honor in the Dharma hall.

Despite all the great moments on this trip to the mainland, the most memorable was Hsing Yun’s family reunion. He arrived at his home village in time for

his mother's eighty-seventh birthday. It had been a difficult separation. The family was ostracized and interrogated on numerous occasions due to Hsing Yun's departure decades ago. His mother was forced into extra labor and not allowed to keep a single picture of her son on hand.

Though the trip marked his first return home, it was actually the second time Hsing Yun had seen his mother since his departure as a child. They managed a secret meeting in 1981, when the two came together in Japan and Los Angeles for a short reunion. However, the period of separation, secrecy, and suffering was finally over, and Hsing Yun's ability to meet openly in his hometown with his mother and siblings was a fully joyous occasion.

As Hsing Yun rode into the city on the way to meet his family, people lined the streets three rows deep to welcome him. Others stared out windows. One journalist reporting on the scene wrote, "After greeting his mother, Hsing Yun presented her with a bouquet of flowers, and holding her hand, he said simply, 'I've come back!' He said nothing more. His mother answered, 'It's good to have you back; it's good to have you back!' Eyes brimming with tears, the bitter longing and feelings of separation could not be fully expressed."

In the early 1990s, while Hsing Yun resided at Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles, he was able to bring

his mother to stay there for several years, where she would often accompany him to ceremonies, lectures, and other events. At one point, Hsing Yun jokingly teased his mother regarding his childhood departure to the monastery, “How could you give me away to others so easily? Didn’t you want me anymore?” His mother replied, “So many people need you, how dare I keep you for myself. You are not [only] my son, you belong to everyone.”

Hsing Yun’s mother lived at Hsi Lai Temple until her passing in 1996. Hsing Yun was in Taiwan when he learned his mother was in critical condition, and immediately flew to Los Angeles, but was unable to return in time. Tzu Chuang relayed his mother’s final wish that Hsing Yun “should busy himself with the problems of all sentient beings and not trouble himself on my account.” Hsing Yun’s mother continued to show the gentle, selfless character with which she raised her son through to her final breath.

This time in Hsing Yun’s life was marked by several hardships. In the months prior, Hsing Yun had weathered additional tragedy. Hsing Yun’s first disciple and the monk who took his place as abbot of Fo Guang Shan, Venerable Hsin Ping, suddenly passed away. One month prior Hsing Yun had invited Vice President Al Gore to visit Hsi Lai Temple. The meeting was much celebrated by the temple community, but later came under fire as a violation of campaign

finance laws. The matter would be resolved after a lengthy investigation, but it would take years for Hsi Lai Temple to regain its position of prominence and trust within the community.

But Hsing Yun was undaunted and pushed through such adversity with a period of massive expansion. With the BLIA well-established, branch temples were founded across the United States in Texas, Illinois, Arizona, and New Jersey. Today there are over two hundred branch temples, and Fo Guang Shan has expanded to every continent except Antarctica.

In 1998, Hsing Yun founded a Buddhist satellite television station called Beautiful Life TV. In 2000, he founded *The Merit Times*, a daily Buddhist newspaper distributed internationally. Hsing Yun also sponsored and edited several major academic achievements. The eight-volume *Fo Guang Buddhist Dictionary* stands as the authoritative Chinese-language reference on Buddhist history, doctrine, and culture. Hsing Yun also acted as the editor for the massive *Fo Guang Tripitaka*, a translation of the most important Buddhist scriptures from classical Chinese into annotated modern Chinese. Both have since been digitized and are freely available online.

Hsing Yun once again attempted to galvanize and unify the Buddhist community, this time on an international scale, by organizing a full-ordination

ceremony in India at Bodhgaya, the site of Sakyamuni Buddha's awakening. The project combined several of Hsing Yun's passions. First was to promote international Buddhism by inviting prominent monastics from throughout the Buddhist world to act as preceptors, as well as prospective monastics from many different countries to participate. The site of the ordination was also richly symbolic: India had been the birthplace of Buddhism, and its holy sites are frequent pilgrimage sites for all Buddhists.

The ordination ceremony also tapped into another of Hsing Yun's passions: the education and elevation of Buddhist women. At Fo Guang Shan, female monastics outnumber male monastic nearly ten to one, and contrary to Chinese cultural custom, they are afforded the same educational and leadership opportunities as men. By reaching out internationally Hsing Yun hoped to enfranchise more female monastics, especially from the Southern Buddhist tradition, whose female ordination lineage died out over a thousand years ago.

Though hosting and logistics were a struggle, the ordination ceremony at Bodhgaya was a success. The ceremony brought together the Theravada, Mahayana, and Tibetan Buddhist traditions, but the most valuable and long lasting accomplishment was the successful revitalization of the Theravada lineage of fully-ordained female monastics. The

project impressed the Tibetan monastic Kunga Dorje Rinpoche so much, that he entrusted Hsing Yun with a relic of the Buddha's tooth he had been protecting since saving it from destruction during the Cultural Revolution, with the hopes that one day Hsing Yun would be able to build a pagoda to house the relic. Honored to receive the gift, Hsing Yun embarked on a fifteen year effort to develop and build the Buddha Memorial Center and fulfill his promise.

It is hard to say what is next for Hsing Yun. Despite his waning health, the Buddhist leader refused to slow down. Decades of struggle with diabetes has left him mostly blind, but Hsing Yun continued to travel, give talks, attend to his disciples, and even write his daily column for *The Merit Times*. Needless to say, Hsing Yun looked toward the future as he had for his entire life as a monastic.

“The development of Buddhism must keep pace with the times, for only then can it function effectively to liberate beings as opportunities arise. This is why we should make a positive effort to study the direction of Buddhism's future development, and we should also engage in overall planning, in order to ensure that Buddhist resources are effectively utilized.”

Hsing Yun saw a future in which Buddhism is even more a part of people's daily lives and contributes to their moral growth and mental well-being.

Buddhism should bridge all aspects of society, bringing together monastics and laypersons and harmonizing with the local environment. Hsing Yun hoped the Buddhism of the future could be unified, with a shared system of precepts, assemblies, services, and buildings, with more communication between the various Buddhist traditions. Hsing Yun also wished to see an expansion of popular Buddhist media, including music, art, sports teams, libraries, and magazines to help bring Buddhism to the public.

Though these are lofty goals, Hsing Yun continued as he always had, bringing people together, forging connections, and crafting innovation. Hsing Yun reflected, “I have never deliberately planned out what I should do. I have spent my life doing what I can in response to the needs of sentient beings as circumstances permit. When the conditions are present, one cannot help but to act, but if the conditions are absent, nothing will succeed. As for my own role, I simply do my duty the best I can.”

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