



## My Perspective on Life and Death

我對生死的看法

Hear Me Out

貧僧有話要說系列

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## A Brief Biography of Venerable Master Hsing Yun

Venerable Master Hsing Yun (1927–2023) was born in Jiangsu Province, China. He studied at various renowned Buddhist institutions, such as Qixia Vinaya College and Jiaoshan Buddhist College.

Master Hsing Yun arrived in Taiwan in 1949 and soon after became the chief editor of the publication *Human Life*. In 1953, his efforts in establishing Buddhist chanting groups strengthened the foundation for his subsequent endeavors in the promotion of the Dharma. The master founded Fo Guang Shan Monastery in 1967, with the primary goal of promoting Humanistic Buddhism through Buddhist education, culture, charity, and propagation of the Dharma. Since then, over two hundred branch temples have been established in major cities around the world. He

also set up art galleries, libraries, publishing houses, bookstores, mobile clinics, Buddhist colleges, and universities, including University of the West, Fo Guang University, Nan Hua University, Nan Tien Institute, and Guang Ming College. Since 1970, Ta Tzu Children's Home and Fo Guang Senior Home have been built to support and assist those in need of emergency relief and social services.

In 1977, the Fo Guang Tripitaka Editing Board was formed to compile the *Fo Guang Buddhist Canon* and *Fo Guang Dictionary of Buddhism*. Others including *Selected Chinese Buddhist Texts in the Modern Language*, *Fo Guang Textbooks*, *Essential Guide to Buddhism*, and *Pearls of Wisdom: Prayers for Engaged Living* have also been published.

Master Hsing Yun has dedicated his life to propagating Humanistic Buddhism. As a global citizen, he continued to foster joy and harmony, oneness and coexistence, respect and tolerance, and equality and peace throughout the world. When he founded the Buddha's Light International Association in 1991 and was elected president of its world headquarters, he was closer to realizing the ideal of "the

Buddha’s light shining throughout the three thousand realms and the Dharma water flowing across the five continents.”





## Foreword to *Hear Me Out*

In March 2015, the Taipei City Government questioned Tzu Chi Foundation's disputed Neihu District project which had been turned down by four consecutive mayors of Taipei. This controversy caused widespread public criticism and stirred up issues which drew in the entire Buddhist religion.

The truth is Tzu Chi certainly has contributed positively to society, and their charitable and generous acts in relief aid and service over the past decades cannot be so easily denied. While Tzu Chi has gathered Buddhists and society in making charitable donations for social welfare projects, it is nevertheless no more than a social welfare organization, not a Buddhist order that is rooted in temples or monasteries.

Certainly, Tzu Chi must reflect on this matter. Other than a series of controversies, there is also the issue of Tzu Chi having kept donors and the public in the dark regarding its financial status. Because I, a humble monk, am also somewhat connected with Tzu Chi since I attended the groundbreaking ceremony for a Tzu Chi site fifty years ago, I feel obliged to speak up on behalf of innocent Buddhists whose faith and reputation have been jeopardized by public criticism.

In the beginning, I only set out to write one or two messages regarding the matter, but as the critiques of Tzu Chi and even Buddhism itself continued to worsen, I extended a third, fourth, and even a twentieth message. I remember even when I was in Hainan, China, to attend the 2015 Boao Forum for Asia, I was still busy writing a foreword for the “Humble Monk” series that was being published for *The Merit Times*’ 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Unexpectedly, these messages received an overwhelming response from Buddhists and non-Buddhists worldwide. Throughout the seventy-seven years of my life as a monk, I have never been

so well-received by Buddhists, who requested that I keep writing. Feeling very touched by such enthusiasm, I therefore continued to narrate these articles, which were transcribed by Venerable Miao Kuang and members of my secretariat. As a result, forty messages from a humble monk have been completed to date.

These forty messages serve as an explanation. Sixty years ago, I settled in Yilan and began propagating Humanistic Buddhism by involving youths in music, singing, and dancing activities. In 1963, I then established a Buddhist College in Kaohsiung to recruit youths to study, practice, and devote themselves to Buddhism, in particular, to the propagation of Humanistic Buddhism. The college was later relocated to Fo Guang Shan, which, after fifty years, has managed to expand to all five continents of the world.

The Fo Guang Shan Order is not under the name of any individual but belongs to all Buddhists and devotees. As I narrate these stories on how Fo Guang Shan has established cultural, educational, and charitable undertakings for society without concealing any

facts, it is my hope to provide a report to the public and devotees, which should be deemed a good intention. At the same time, I would also like to provide a guideline to my disciples in their future spiritual endeavors. For example, I wish for them to develop the spirit of equality, to take matters into their own hands by saying that “the future of Buddhism is on my shoulders,” to regard illness as a companion, to be willing to relieve people from suffering and adversity, to cherish life, to care for the environment, and to value spiritual preservation.

For any religion, if you believe in it, then it is Buddha or God to you; if you do not, it is nothing but Mara or the Devil to you. Be it Buddha or Mara, God or Devil, it is all up to you to decide. I hereby humbly express my hope for society to be purified, for moral values to be enhanced, for society as a whole to be bettered, and for there to be peaceful exchanges between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. I bear no further wishes in writing this book.

In the beginning, these articles were published in *The Merit Times* newspaper. As more and more requests to sponsor the publication of this as a book

continue to pour in, I hereby entrust the Venerable Master Hsing Yun Public Education Trust Fund, readers of *The Merit Times*, and all devotees to print and publicly distribute one million free copies of *Hear Me Out: Messages from a Humble Monk*. All you need to do is fill out a form, and without having to pay a cent, a complimentary copy of this book will be delivered to you by Fo Guang Shan.

Other than the forty messages, some appendices have also been collected in this book, along with selected responses from my readers. To establish a correct view and understanding in Buddhism among the world of humanity is my greatest hope of all.

In hearing the disciple who is responsible for producing this book explain that the cost for each copy is about NTD\$500, my reply was that money is not the issue: what matters is what we are offering to readers—namely, our honesty and sincerity. I therefore would like to offer this book as a gift to all readers, that you may all be blessed with safety and peace:

May kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity pervade the Dharma realms;  
May all people and heavenly beings benefit from our blessings and friendship;  
May our ethical practice of Chan, Pure Land, and the Precepts help us to realize equality and patience;  
May we undertake the Great Vows with humility and gratitude.

*Hsing yun*

May 16th, 2015

Fo Guang Shan Monastery,  
Founding Master's Quarters



## My Perspective on Life and Death

*What matters is not how long you have  
lived.*

*What matters is that you have given  
meaning to the life that you once  
lived.*





Are you afraid of dying?

The same question asked differently: do you like coming home?

“Face death without fear,” as the ancients used to say—dying is the same as coming home. To be happy or afraid of going home is a choice that we need to make and ponder. From the Buddhist perspective, people do not really die; the cycle of existence is a circular process of old age, sickness, death, and then rebirth. Once we are born, aging is inevitable, and once we age, illness becomes inescapable. After illness comes death, followed again by birth. Spatially, there are the directions east, west, south, and north. If you move in one of these directions, you will eventually return to your starting point. For example, if I am headed eastward from Taoyuan Airport to New York, I would arrive at my destination in eighteen hours, but if I continue to fly eastward, another eighteen hours later I would end up in Taoyuan again. By traveling around the globe, we end up in our starting point.

## **Old Age, Sickness, Death, and Birth: Getting Reintroduced to Life**

Once we are born, we must die and then be born again, yet most people are ignorant of this inevitable process. As a result, the birth of a baby will be celebrated by the entire family, and people will congratulate the parents for having a new baby boy or girl. The truth is birth means there will be death, a fact that one does not need to wait until the end of life to realize. In the same way, what follows death is rebirth; therefore, why do we need to be sad? We must reevaluate the entire process of birth and death.

When I was a young monastic, I often heard stories about how Buddhist masters had passed away. Some of them were able to foretell their passing, some mourned for themselves before death came, and some bid others goodbye by announcing their “time of departure.” Some even treated death as a game. For example, Chan Master Feixi died doing a handstand, and Chan Master



Puhua passed away after running around the four city gates. I have heard many stories like these. On top of that, I grew up in a time of war and have slept beside corpses and witnessed a field full of dead soldiers; perhaps this is why death no longer intimidates me.

While there is no need for us to fear death, since the transition between life and death is only a short moment, we nevertheless need to be careful with the way death occurs. Some deaths are pleasant, while some are painful. In the past, some people were executed by having a thousand knives cut into their bodies, some had their limbs and neck tied to five horses that galloped in different directions, some were clubbed to death, some were forced into a burning pot, and some were beheaded or cut in half at the waist. These are rather cruel ways to die. However, modern day executions are more humane; for example, criminals are anesthetized before they are shot so that death is not as painful but is similar to falling asleep.

## **The Circle of Life: Passing Away Is Like Immigrating**

We never really die because life is like firewood: when one log burns out, another is thrown into the fire. While each log of firewood may be different, just like the different stages of life, the fire of life continues to burn. The chanting beads worn on our wrists are strings of up to one hundred and eight beads. As you flip from the first bead to the second



Life is like a string of beads.



and all the way to the last, you will again return to the start. In the same way, we go from one stage of life to another inside the cycle of rebirth. Therefore, we should be able to face death with peace and tranquility. Furthermore, when the body ages, it feels like a machine is wearing out and needs to be replaced. With this mindset, some elderly people even look forward to death as a way of renewal. Just as old clothes need to be replaced and broken houses need repair, death is like changing into new clothes or having a house rebuilt. There is no need to be frightened by it.

A reason why people may fear death is the uncertainty of where they will go next; fear arises upon the absence of a clear destination. If you knew that after death you would return to this world again, then you would not be afraid. As for myself, having always been certain that I will come back as a monk again, I once suggested to Cardinal Paul Shan SJ, “In our next lives, may you still be a Catholic priest and I a Buddhist monk.” Since we have a goal, death is naturally not frightening. Near the end of his life, Cardinal Shan had terminal cancer, and he embarked

on a “Farewell to Life Journey,” thereby demonstrating a positive outlook toward death.

Other than the above reasons, a key reason we fear death is that we define it as the moment when our physical bodies stop functioning. In other words, we are “alive” when our bodies are active, and we are “dead” when they stop functioning or breathing. This is a common view and definition of death.

However, from the Buddhist perspective, life never dies. Rather, it exists in varied forms. Water becomes ice when placed in a freezer, pudding when mixed with flour, and clouds once it evaporates. Yet the essence of water never changes. In other words, while the physical form changes, the essence of life, which is non-arising and non-ceasing, simply manifests in different forms in different realms.

Expressed in modern terms, death is like immigration, where you simply move from one country to another. Of course, you need to be equipped with sufficient finances, so you can afford a luxurious house in your new destination. If your capital is insufficient, then you could end up in a poor and deprived place.



Therefore, before we begin another round of birth and death, we need to prepare ourselves for this immigration by making sure that our provisions are plentiful. Imagine upon death that you are without a goal or provisions; it would be like being exiled to an unknown destination. Of course, it would be very frightening since you do not know anything about where you are going.

**Insight into Causes and Conditions:  
A Thorough Understanding of the Universe**

Another reason people may fear death is their reluctance to part from life. While they are alive, they have family members, places and things they know, and even wealth they possess. To them, death means a total loss, and thus, they are reluctant to leave it all behind. The truth is you will not go empty-handed because your intrinsic merit and wealth of virtue are much more important than worldly things. What is more, these are the qualities you actually take with you upon death.

Some people also fear death due to the reason that all connections established in life will be severed and that they will be headed toward a completely strange place. In Buddhism, this is called the loss of past life memory. Once you change into a new body, it is like moving to a different country whose cities, streets, shops, and people are all different. However, this is not worth grieving over because it is simply how life works. You lose some things and gain others. In future lives, you will establish new conditions and new relations.

When explained from the Buddhist perspective, because all people have been a part of the cycle of birth and death for infinite years, everyone that has ever lived was at some point our very own parents or siblings. Everyone has at some point been our spouse or children. If we think of it this way, people of all races, nations, or regions have all been related to us. That is why the law of causes and conditions and dependent origination hold that every person lives inside conditions. Once the conditions are present, we are born, and once they are gone, we then cease to be.



This very idea of conditionality is in fact the key to life and death, the core of rebirth.

For this reason, Buddhists follow a very simple rule: to establish good affinity with others as much as possible. Once these affinities are established, your future conditions will be optimal. On the other hand, those who rarely do so will keep coming to dead ends. Therefore, whether you do or do not have faith is not as important to your future as whether your deeds are wholesome or unwholesome, and whether you develop good affinities or not.

The truth is some people do have familiar experiences similar to their past lives. Say when you meet someone, and you tell them, “May our paths cross again in the future.” From this, one may feel an affinity from the past. Some also say, “Let’s build up a mutual connection to meet in our future lives.” Couples may wish to be married again in their future lives, and teachers may wish to find their pupils again in their future lives. For example, someone may say, “I want to immigrate to Europe!” or “I vow to move to Australia!” Sometimes such

intentions can influence the direction of someone's life. However, within Buddhism, there are faith, vows, and deeds. If you have a vow, the question of whether or not you can actualize it depends on the underlying forces of your actions and deeds. To summarize, the so-called "truth" of the universe is within dependent origination. If we are able to realize the law of dependent origination and causes and conditions, we can fathom all phenomena within the universe.

**To Be Reborn in a Good Place:  
Broadly Developing Good Affinities**

In terms of what needs to be done when someone dies, nowadays the children of the deceased conduct prayer services for their parents or elders. Why is this so? It is wrong to think that Buddhist liberation rituals need to be conducted so that one's parents will not fall into hell. Why not think instead of your parents ascending to heaven or back into the human world? Why think about them going to hell?



In my opinion, while services and liberation rituals practiced in Chinese Buddhism cater to the wishes of society, they are nevertheless irrational.

The Dharma is like a ferry that carries us across an ocean of vice. Thus, it serves the purpose of liberation. However, whether chanting services are conducted appropriately or not, or whether they are suitable for you, is worth thinking about.

In my opinion, the best way to pay tribute to one's deceased parents or elders is by holding a commemoration service to share their virtues and good deeds or by establishing a scholarship or foundation in their name. This is similar to sending money to one's families and friends who have immigrated to Europe or Australia in order to assist them.

Some Buddhists are not particular with the way their commemoration services are conducted. For example, Venerable Tzu Hang's dying message was, "Never mind conducting a Flaming Mouth Service for me; do not try to liberate me either. Just chant Guanyin's name and establish your own affinities. I will end up where I deserve to be."

To be frank, what he meant was that even if he went to hell, none of us would be able to save him. Or even if he went to heaven, none of us had anything to do with that. Just as the saying goes, “Live your own life and die your own death; take your own food for your own nourishment.” In Buddhism, we are the only ones who will bear our own karmic consequences.

In Buddhism, there is a way to determine whether the deceased is headed toward a good rebirth or a bad one. There is a verse that says an individual’s rebirth can be determined by the location of heat on the body after death: “Warmth in the eyes means rebirth in heaven, warmth in the chest means the human realm, warmth in the belly means the hungry ghost realm, warmth in the knees means the animal realm, and warmth in the soles of the feet means hell.”

It is neither impossible nor inevitable for a human to be reborn as a ghost or in another world. While it is possible for one to be reborn as a donkey or horse, it is still karma which will move one on to one’s next destination, so it does not mean one’s future is doomed by fate. It is like serving a prison



sentence: there is still a chance that one may go back to leading a normal life. Nevertheless, it is best not to commit any crimes, but instead it is important to live as a good person and lead a wholesome life, lifetime after lifetime.

### **Foretelling the Time of Departure: Living and Dying with Perfect Ease**

A few years ago, the 10th anniversary of Princess Diana's death was celebrated by her sons, family, friends, and the public in the form of a tribute that involved music and singing. This was surely a good way to commemorate her. Traveling the world, I have witnessed people handling the death of their loved ones in a calm and peaceful manner. For them, since they had cherished the opportunity to be together happily while they were still alive, all that was left to do upon someone's death was to say a proper good-bye. Some individuals, on the other hand, fought and opposed each other in life, couples treated each other as enemies, while parents and children detested and

resented each other. When death comes, they then grieve and mourn in such an irrational manner. Such extreme attitudes are like a drama that makes life seem fake and unreal.

Why wait until a loved one dies to be sad? Isn't it better to love and care for one another while we are still alive? There is no need to grieve too much for someone's death either; simply wish them well and look forward to the next time your paths cross.

I have borne witness to many Pure Land practitioners who were able to foretell their time of death. For example, in the 1950's, Li Chi-hua, president of the Taipei Chanting Association, bid everyone good-bye in the Buddha shrine moments before he passed away. Hong Kong's Lam Ling-zan, Director of Tung Lin Kok Yuen, announced one day, "I am going to leave you all tomorrow." The next morning, she was sitting eating breakfast, so others thought it was a joke. However, as soon as she finished breakfast, she turned to everyone and said, "Let's chant Buddha's name." Then in the midst of chanting, she passed away. If death could always be this easy and carefree,



wouldn't life and death be the same? What would there be to be sad about?

I have always wished to be a filial son, but at age ten, I was unaware that my father had died. At age seventy, my ninety-five year old mother passed away in America, but on my flight from Taiwan to tend to her funeral matters, I did not have many feelings of sadness. Instead, I thought to myself, the fact that my mother lived to the age of ninety-five is something that should be celebrated. Of course, I did wonder if this lack of emotion made me an unfilial son. Why would I have such thoughts? Is it because my life as a monastic enabled me to see beyond life and death?

**Living and Dying Without Fear:  
Firm Faith in Causes, Conditions,  
and Effects**

Now that I am old, the occasions of sickness and death could befall me at any time. The only misgiving I have had about death since I was young is that I might die a painful death, causing others to ridicule

me as a monastic who struggled so much at the moment of death. For this reason, I have been training myself to die a good death.

Up until now, I am unsure how well-trained I am, but I firmly believe that death is not a big deal. As long as it is not painful, I will regard it as a time for deep slumber. While it is inevitable for a flame to burn out, I am confident that there will be no surprises; therefore, I am fearless. As for what I have owned in this world, those things were never truly mine anyway, so they should all be returned to their rightful owners; that is, all of you.

However, to say that I have come and will go empty-handed is not entirely true. What I will take with me are the affinities which you have given me and vice versa. Will these not all follow me when I leave? Please refer to the open letter titled “An Honest Revelation” for my final words.

Pure Land Buddhists often wonder where exactly the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss is. As the saying goes, “The Pure Land is none other than in the mind; Amitabha is none other than one’s intrinsic nature.”



I feel that those who chant the Buddha's name will return to this world again because the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss also exists in the human world! After enlightenment, Chan practitioners' mental agility, knowledge, and views will help them to be reborn in the world. Are these not the good effects of their practice of chanting the Buddha's name and meditation in the present life? There is a saying, "You receive your benefits from your cultivation, and others receive theirs." No matter what your approach to cultivation is, you will surely reap your own rewards. Just as Venerable Tzu Hang once said, "The nature of phenomena is intrinsically empty, while cause and effect will always be precise; you must bear the consequences of your own deeds, for there will be no one else to take your place."

A common question is, "Where will I go in the future?" I feel that the majority of people will be reborn in the human world again—some will live a wealthy life, some will be poor, and some will live a lowly life depending on whether their merits are great or small. In other words, heaven and earth all

exist in the human world. Some people will find life in this world to be one in heaven, while some will find it to be hell. Since heaven and hell are in this world, human beings are likely to return as human beings. Similarly, wherever the seeds of trees, flowers, or beans are planted is where they will grow.

Where is heaven? In this world. Where is hell? In this world as well. How about the ever tranquil and bright Pure Land and the great open space? Both are in this world. Scientists strive to solve the question, "Is there intelligent life on other planets?" I think there is. Some people ask about water or other signs of life on these planets, but I don't think we need to deliberate over such questions because there are certainly worlds that are similar to ours. After all, there is no limit to space; it is vast beyond comparison. This is like, as we have all heard, the evidence of Chinese people existing millions of years ago. However, throughout history, cultures developed slowly after undergoing many obstacles and setbacks, taking a long time to evolve from the Stone Age, to the Bronze Age, to an agrarian culture, to the Industrial Age, and so on.



## **The Meaning of Life: Leave Behind Your Merits**

On another note, while many speak of past lives based only on groundless hearsay, which is the same as listening to gossip, and others base theirs on certain human logic, which is not totally without proof, there is no need to deny or become overly attached to the idea of past lives. If a man and a woman are meant for each other and share the same wish, then they will meet again in a future life. If they are meant to be foes, then separation will be inevitable.

Some questions still remain unanswered, such as: exactly how long did the ancient mythical Chinese emperors Yao and Shun live? Did the Daoist immortal Peng Zhu actually live for 800 years? Although existing sources show that Peng Zhu lived to 800, the technique of calculation used in the past shows that their year was an equivalent of our modern sixty days. If this were true, then Peng Zhu only lived about 140 years, and the Tang Dynasty monastic named Bodhiruci actually lived longer to about 156.

Since ancient times, death has been given a sense of mystery because there is no knowing where you will go next. However, the “Verse of Cause and Effect” shows how you can see into the future, “Look at your current effects for a past cause; look at your current deeds for future effects.”

People celebrate their birthdays and weddings, and they mourn for the deceased not only in funeral services but also weekly services, 100-day-of-death services, or even annual memorials. What makes the difference here is one’s merit; if one is well established in merit, then one will be remembered for as long as the sun and moon exist. If one is not, then one may simply decay: either way, death is no longer important.

What legacy would you like to leave behind? What matters is not how long you live—what matters is that you give meaning to your life.

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