



# I Am Not a Monk “Sponging Off” Buddhism

我不是「呷教」的和尚

Fo Guang Shan  
International Translation Center



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(英文版)

Venerable Master Hsing Yun  
English Translation by Robert H. Smitheram

Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center

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### Author's Preface

*“Buddhism depends upon me” has been  
a guiding light for my entire life.*

I was born during the chaos of war, and although I experienced hardships in my life, I give thanks to my parents for bestowing a compassionate nature upon me. Even as a child, I cared for and protected little animals, and I enjoyed helping others. After I joined the monastic order at the age of twelve, the strict and domineering education of the monastery instilled in me an accommodating personality: I do not fear difficulty or adversity in doing anything. I am now ninety-three years old [2019] and have been a monastic for more than eighty years. If I were to sum up my life, I think the phrase “born into tribulation, raised in adversity, yet experienced a lifetime of joy” would serve as an adequate account of it.

I have spent my entire life promoting Humanistic Buddhism, and I always encouraged myself with the words “live three hundred years’ worth of life,” so I have never ceased in my efforts for Buddhism. However, the world is the combination of causes and conditions. Aging, sickness, death, and rebirth are natural phenomena; so too will the body of flesh experience times when sicknesses must be healed. At the end of 2016, owing to over-exhaustion, I suffered a brain hemorrhage and underwent an operation. I am grateful to Chen Chao-Long, honorary director of the Kaohsiung Chang Gung Memorial Hospital, who helped me by leading the medical treatment team. I am also



grateful for the blessings invoked by all the people connected to me throughout the world, for it was by such means that I was restored to health. I have made sickness my friend and taken patience as my strength throughout this life; I really do not feel I have suffered any pain, only some inconveniences. Nothing hinders my heart, and I remain free and at ease, for there is only joy and happiness.

During my convalescence, my disciples told me that everybody warmly received the *Complete Works of Venerable Master Hsing Yun* as soon as it was published, and it has now already gone into its third printing. But a work that encompasses a total of three hundred and sixty-five volumes is really too enormous, and it is unclear with which volume one should begin. My disciples wondered if it were possible for me to select a few articles from the collection that focus on my own experiences and publish them as a separate volume, serving as a standard upon which their practice of Buddhism could rely. What I have spent my entire life saying and writing is also what I have been doing myself. If it can be of benefit to everyone and is helpful to Buddhism, then, of course, I would happily see it accomplished. I have heard from the editor Miss Tsai Meng-Hua that this work, *I Am Not a Monk "Sponging Off" Buddhism*, is ready for publication.

The term "Sponging off Buddhism" means making a living through a dependence upon Buddhism. More than seventy years ago [1949], Venerable Chenkong wrote me a letter from Mount Putuo in Zhejiang Province, and he asked Venerable Zhuyun to deliver it into my hands. He wrote, "Now we Buddhist youth must let 'Buddhism depend upon us,' and not give any thought to how 'we depend upon Buddhism.'" This passage made a deep impression upon me.

Yes, I hope Buddhism depends upon me, for I do not want to depend upon Buddhism, which means that I do not want to be a monk who "sponges off" Buddhism. I promised myself to be someone who repays kindness; furthermore, I vowed "to give to others and not expect others to give to me." "Buddhism depends upon me" is a phrase that has become a guiding light in my heart, and I am always encouraged by it, for it makes my heart shine more brightly and enhances the power of my faith.

Indeed, Humanistic Buddhism is the future light and hope of Buddhism. I have benefited from the kindness and generosity of the Triple Gem:<sup>1</sup> I never received a formal education and had never even seen a school during my childhood, yet I became an elementary school principal, established five universities throughout the world, and received honorary doctorates from more than thirty universities as well as many honorary professorships from numerous educational institutions. On five continents, I have established three hundred temples, in which more than one thousand three hundred disciples engage in propagating the Dharma through culture, education, charity, and Dharma services, respectively. I am grateful to everyone who has supported my work to promote Humanistic Buddhism, for it has allowed the Buddhism of sutra chanting and repentance services during the Ming [1368–1644 CE] and Qing [1644–1911 CE] dynasties to develop into the Humanistic Buddhism accepted by people in the 21st century.

Based on the belief that Humanistic Buddhism holds true to the original intent of the Buddha, I have made propagating Buddhism my mission in life and placed the assembly before myself, so I humbly offer this book, *I Am Not a Monk*

<sup>1</sup> The Buddha, the Dharma (the teachings of the Buddha), and the Sangha (the Buddhist monastic community).

“Sponging Off” Buddhism, to all readers. If anyone were to ask me again what I wish for in this lifetime, I would give my blessing to everyone: “May peace and happiness brighten the five continents.”

—Hsing Yun, Founder’s Hall at Fo Guang Shan  
February 2019



Foreword by Charles Kao

*Giving is Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s  
initial resolve and his life’s practice —  
I don’t wish for Buddhism to raise me,  
I wish for Buddhism to progress.*

I. The Venerable Master Speaks; He Remembers; and  
He Is Writing.

This is Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s first book to come out after his recovery, something truly precious and so incredible. It is just like August of last year when the Venerable Master exhibited his *One-Stroke Calligraphy<sup>2</sup> After Illness* for the first time in Nanjing. He surprised and delighted everyone.

I was indeed fortunate to attend. Nanjing, where this exhibition took place, is the place where I was born, and this new book is being published by Global Views-Commonwealth Publishing Group, which gives me the pleasure of being the first among its readers.

Looking back to October 30th, 2016, Venerable Master Hsing Yun gave me his consent to undertake the important tasks of making his speech and presenting awards at our 14th Global Views Leaders Forum. On the night before I was to

<sup>2</sup> At age 70, Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s vision began to blur, and his hands started to shake. Nevertheless, he focused his mind and continued to write. From that time forward, he has done his calligraphy in one continuous stroke, for if he raised his brush, he would not be able to see where to continue. Thus, his work came to be known as “one-stroke calligraphy.”



The Venerable Master and Charles Kao at Dajue Temple.

present his speech, I received a phone call from one of his disciples, who said the Venerable Master was to undergo immediate surgery due to a brain hemorrhage. This truly was an overwhelming turn of events. Venerable Chueh Pei hurried over and made a last-minute appearance at the auditorium to explain the Venerable Master's ideas in a clear and moving way, prompting an enthusiastic response.

The *United Daily News* even reported how, on October 31st, the Venerable Master “had suffered a stroke and was in the hospital for surgery, the blood clot being as big as a fist” in its lead story on the front page. As a longtime reader of the *United Daily News*, I have never read about any other popular leader being treated with such a degree of importance. For a long time now, Venerable Master Hsing Yun has been on the level of a national treasure, a guiding teacher and so well respected by everyone.

The Venerable Master, who for many years now has “made a friend out of sickness,” already looks upon sickness as a friend in peaceful coexistence; he also looks upon death as cause and effect,<sup>3</sup> for he has already placed death and rebirth beyond his

<sup>3</sup> One of the teachings of the Buddha: once a cause is generated, when appropriate, necessary conditions are present, its effect will come to fruition; cause and effect govern all things.

sphere of consideration. However, the major brain operation on this occasion was no small matter, and after the success of the operation, everyone felt a sense of relief, but the road to recovery was not something we dared think about. If the Venerable Master were able to live on but lose his ability to remember and speak, then what kind of torment would it be for him since he has always enjoyed working throughout his life?

The speed of the Venerable Master's recovery far exceeded the most optimistic estimations of the medical treatment team lead by Dr. Chen Chao-Long at Chang Gung Memorial Hospital. This is a miracle in medical history. A few months after the operation, the progress of his rehabilitation was accelerating daily.

“The Venerable Master is speaking”; “the Venerable Master remembers”; and “the Venerable Master is writing”; every time his disciples passed on such good news, I was overcome with excitement and wished to pay him a visit.

During the summer of last year, a disciple of his called me on the phone to pass on some words from the Venerable Master: “You tell Professor Kao that I really long to see him.” This helped me overcome my hesitation of not daring to disturb the Venerable Master, and I hurriedly went up to visit him.

During the Venerable Master's recuperation, I made close to ten visits; I further made a special trip to Dajue Temple at Yixing in mainland China, along with the publisher Cora Wang and a few colleagues. The Venerable Master was resting and recuperating in the serene and spacious seat of his lineage,<sup>4</sup> with its bamboo-covered hills in the back and a lake reflecting the clouds in the front. Truly, it was like a scene in

<sup>4</sup> The temple where a monastic's master originally came from; the foundational seat of one's Buddhist lineage and practice, from which other temples are connected and supported.



paradise. Every time I visited, I always came away with priceless photographs and observations.

## II. One “Small Book” Is yet Again Another “Great Work.”

The thickness of this new book constitutes a “small book” when compared with the Venerable Master’s other written works, which amount to more than thirty million characters over the course of his lifetime, but in terms of the ideas being promoted here, it is a “great work.” Everything has its source. The Venerable Master is asking himself, “What was my initial resolve for becoming a monk? Where is my fundamental motivation?”

Whether he is at Fo Guang Shan in Kaohsiung or at Dajue Temple in Yixing, during the early dawn or after sunset, how has the Venerable Master, at over ninety years of age, managed to become a Buddhist leader who has established an abundance of Buddhist temples, universities, middle schools, primary schools, and art galleries, as well as founded media platforms, such as *The Merit Times*<sup>5</sup> and Beautiful Life Television,<sup>6</sup> and even basketball teams? Putting it in more direct terms, how has the Venerable Master been able to create something out of nothing, constantly expanding both at home and abroad?

The Venerable Master’s nonchalant answer is “I took part in all of these things, but none of them belongs to me. I never want what individuals give to me, nor have I ever possessed a single dollar; I am always willing to let go. Money belongs to everyone; it just gets exchanged from here to there and back again.”

<sup>5</sup> A daily newspaper founded by Venerable Master Hsing Yun in 2000.

<sup>6</sup> A non-profit television station in Taiwan founded by Venerable Master Hsing Yun in 1997; it was originally known as Buddha’s Light Television (1997–2002).

In 1949, he came to Ilan from Yangzhou as a twenty-three-year-old monk, and his initial resolve was that he did not want to rely on Buddhism financially but rather that Buddhism would progress through his own efforts.

The strength of his initial resolve is something I can completely understand because in 1949, I myself was thirteen years old when I accompanied both of my parents from Shanghai to Taiwan. As a youth, I cultivated a self-striving personality in a village for military dependents and went to the United States to study at the age of twenty-three; it was during these younger days that I developed complete self-reliance. In the face of the “fortuitous little pleasures” that have spread all over Taiwan in recent decades, I exclaim: seek out one’s own job oneself; set up one’s own family oneself; search for one’s own stage oneself; and attend to one’s own old age oneself!

The Venerable Master has probably never read the eighteenth century work *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith, nor has he read *The Competitive Advantage of Nations* by the contemporary [Michael E.] Porter. In no way do these influence his judgments pertaining to wealth, human nature, markets, the state of the world, internationalism, and so on. With his retentive memory, his self-taught understanding, and his learning by analogy, he has his own definite views and holds his own breadth of vision.

## III. Where There Is Dharma, There Is a Way: Where There Is the Venerable Master, There Is Great Achievement.

Throughout his life, the words and deeds of the Venerable Master are the most concrete demonstration of his great achievement: “giving” is the initial resolve; it is unconstrained by form, and it has no end.



The Venerable Master gives people confidence, gives people joy, gives people hope, and gives people convenience; and the Venerable Master promotes doing good deeds, speaking good words, and thinking good thoughts. The Venerable Master has passed on compassion, wisdom, and non-attachment.

Such formless wholesome thoughts move many people and then transform into physical beauty, one after the other, when he sets about establishing Buddhist temples, schools, and art galleries. Everyone becomes the beneficiary of the humanistic bounty.

Having followed the Venerable Master for half a century, Venerable Tzu Jung makes this acute observation: the Venerable Master does not make use of the donations toward Buddhism; instead, he relies on the sums of money from his own writings, author's compensation, and copyright royalties as well as his *One-Stroke Calligraphy*. That would be enough for him, but he takes all of that money and donates its entirety to society and Fo Guang Shan. Not only does he not want it, but he also enjoys giving it away and is happy to give it to others. The people to whom he has provided financial assistance number far more than the hundreds of thousands; the people he supports every day number far more than the hundreds of thousands; but what he has given to society amounts to far more than the thousands of millions. He has neither a bank account, nor does he save any change; he does not even have a desk to call his own.

As for a detailed accounting of the Venerable Master's work, it includes such areas as the educational, cultural, and charitable, but for all of these numerous projects, he does not do them because he "wants" them: they all come about from his giving. It is because of giving that he is able to let go, and it is because of his letting go that he is able to obtain. The poor monk is, on the contrary, not poor but rich instead. It is only

that the Venerable Master "treats not having as having" and "treats emptiness as joy."

Venerable Tzu Jung further stated that over the past sixty years, she has seen how the master has often encountered difficulties, but it really seems that the Buddha is protecting him. When it is obvious "after endless mountains and rivers, one doubts there is a path out" yet one can still find "by going through the shade of a willow and the brightness of flowers, there is a lovely village," he will often say, "Where there is Dharma, there is a way," and the disciples also feel that "Where there is a Venerable Master, there is a great achievement."

Throughout his entire life, the Venerable Master has always firmly grasped the original intention of his initial resolve. Giving is better than receiving, for he does not wish that "everybody does things for him"; rather, he wants to change it into "I do things for everybody." He does not want to depend upon Buddhism; rather, he wants to devote his entire strength to propagating Buddhism.

Forty years earlier, he borrowed the popular saying from [Milton] Friedman winner of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Science "There's no such thing as a free lunch in this world" and called upon his fellow countrymen to strive for themselves. No one could have known that this phrase from a great religious teacher of the Chinese world would develop into "realizing the power of the vow of the human world."

I can only say, "Our Venerable Master is so amazing."

Founder of the Global Views-  
Commonwealth Publishing Group

Foreword by Jude Thomas Manzo

*A Lifetime of Giving through  
Humanistic Buddhism:  
Venerable Master Hsing Yun and  
His Global Contributions*

In 1997, I experienced Humanistic Buddhism firsthand through Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles, California with my wife Shujan Cheng. Prior to this, I had experienced Buddhism as a solitary activity, only reading texts about Buddhism.

At Hsi Lai Temple, the monastics and lay devotees embodied the daily practices of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's approach, encouraging everyone to learn about and practice Humanistic Buddhism by offering weekly classes on meditation, lectures on the Buddhist approach to life, vegetarian lunches, and numerous cultural and volunteer activities, culminating in a short-term monastic retreat and taking refuge.

While at Hsi Lai Temple, my wife and I also met Venerable Yi Chao, Executive Director of the Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center, who encouraged us to volunteer in translation and editing; these include *The Flower Adornment Sutra's Practices and Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva Chapter*; and Venerable Master's *Humble Table, Wise Fare; Infinite Compassion, Endless Wisdom: The Practice of the Bodhisattva Path; Pearls of Wisdom: Prayers for Engaged Living*, volumes 1 and 2; *Traveling to the Other Shore: Buddha's Stories on the Six Perfections*; and the text before you.

As Venerable Master nears the age of ninety-five (2021), this collection may serve as an introduction and overview for anyone who wishes to learn more about and to practice Humanistic Buddhism. Venerable Master wishes, "May peace and happiness brighten the five continents." From a Chinese cultural perspective, our planet consists of five continents, so his wish for peace and happiness is directed to all of us across the globe, whatever our spiritual, national, ethnic, or geographic background, whatever our current conditions may be at the present moment, since we all are interconnected.

**Gifts**

Venerable Master's connection to Buddhism has always been plain and simple. He states, "Buddhism depends upon me." His aspiration is "to live three hundred years' worth of life," making every day of his life a gift to humanity through his daily practices of Humanistic Buddhism.

From the age of twelve in 1939, despite all of the traumatic and life-and-death experiences in the China of World War II and its subsequent Civil War, and all of the social hostility he later faced when moving to Taiwan in 1949 to spread the Dharma, Venerable Master has served as a humble monk, continuously asking himself, "Am I acting like a monk?" using skillful means to teach the Dharma to individuals from all walks of life, successfully recruiting them to assist in renewing Buddhism through the founding of more than three hundred temples as well as children's homes, primary and middle schools, senior homes, art galleries, television and other media platforms, and colleges and universities throughout the world. He has thereby created opportunities for monastics, lay



devotees, and anyone interested in Buddhism to participate in and create new Humanistic Buddhist activities and to study Buddhism at any level, up to and including the undergraduate and graduate levels.

This edition, requested by his devotees, culls from over sixty years of his writings and life experiences, and with quick brush strokes takes us through the initial years of war's effects upon society, of manual labor in Chinese temples, cooking, cleaning, chopping firewood, reading and studying the sutras, and balancing chanting for hours with meditating for hours in temples without electricity; of seriously considering simply serving as a cooking monk or retreating completely from society and dedicating himself exclusively to either studying sutra or to meditation for the rest of his life; of the years of social struggle in Taiwan to ensure that civil authorities would permit the construction of temples requested by the Taiwanese people, of the manual labor in the actual construction of those temples, of preserving them during times of flooding, and of the managerial skills required to ensure their maintenance; of years of skillful writing and promoting the publication of Buddhist texts and translation in numerous languages, bringing the Dharma to diverse audiences; of the most recent years of seriously declining health, of his *One Stroke Calligraphy After Illness*, and of his declaration, "I have made sickness my friend."

Venerable Master's own life experiences, deep spiritual practice, basic humility, and willingness to give to and serve mankind have led to his belief that we should balance the humility of chanting, in which individuals rely upon the Buddha, with meditation, in which individuals learn to rely upon themselves, and can lead to a practice of giving to

humanity that can become almost a daily, continual meditation. In *The Core Teachings* he suggests: "Once we become accomplished at sitting meditation, we will begin to see that it is possible to meditate while standing, or walking, or doing just about anything." This "doing just about anything" might include his own practice of giving and might explain how he has been able to give so very much for so very long, to so very many of us around the world.

For those of us who might not reach this level of meditative giving, Venerable Master emphasizes the "Four Givings," which we can perhaps grasp more readily: "giving people confidence, giving people joy, giving people hope, and giving people convenience." For Venerable Master, giving is his initial resolve, his aspiration, and his vow: it is unconstrained by form, and it has no end.

### **Benefits**

To benefit all of us, Venerable Master has given his life to providing educational opportunities, sponsoring cultural events, engaging in community service, and writing and teaching extensively about the Buddhist path of wisdom and compassion.

Each of the articles in this collection is written in a very straightforward and easy to follow style; Venerable Master does not assume that the reader has a background in Buddhism; instead, the collection serves as a skillful introduction, with a broad perspective that can lead to further study at any level, including the undergraduate and graduate levels.



## Moving Forward

Venerable Master's gifts continue to be available to us on a daily basis through his numerous writings. In addition, the monastics and lay devotees of many of the temples he has founded, rather than allowing the pandemic to reduce or completely eliminate interactions and practices, have increased their offerings via the internet. As a result, anyone who wants to learn more about Humanistic Buddhism can attend temples in the United States, Taiwan, Canada, etc. online, and can attend an expanding number of classes on meditation, sutra study, vegetarian cooking, the tea ceremony, and many other innovative classes brought about by the monastics and lay devotees of the temples.

Whatever our daily life, profession, or our current spiritual practices, may we still take his spirit and practice of "I am not a monk, 'sponging off' Buddhism" to heart in our everyday life and spiritual practices, giving to mankind through our spiritual and other daily practices rather than simply expecting to receive. I hope that reading these excerpts from a monk who has given over eighty years of his life to spreading Humanistic Buddhism can spur you on to develop or refine your own spiritual practices, and to include some of the activities and attitudes described by Venerable Master in this text.

Jude Thomas Manzo  
PhD, Yale University



## Editor's Note

To retain as much of the content and quality of the original Chinese text as possible, contextual information not in the original, such as years and dates, has been added in brackets.

Readers may notice that the age of Venerable Master Hsing Yun varies throughout the text, reflecting the timeline leading up to this publication: The articles "I Am Not a Monk 'Sponging Off' Buddhism" (I, II, and III) were originally published in *The Merit Times* in 2016, when the Venerable Master was ninety years old. These, along with other essays about his life and thoughts, were published together in 2019, when he was ninety-three years old. The only content added to the English translation in 2021 are the foreword by Jude Thomas Manzo and footnotes.

When writing Chinese names and words in English, we use the Hanyu Pinyin romanization system. However, when names already have an accepted common spelling in English, such as Dr. Sun Yat-sen or Kaohsiung, we use that instead.

Chinese names are written last name (family name) first and first name (given name) second. When anglicized, names are written given name first and family name second. For example, Han Kuo-yu was changed to Daniel Han.

In Chinese, 佛光 (Fo Guang) means "Buddha's Light"; both appear throughout the text, depending on conventional usage.

We hope you enjoy this preview of *I Am Not a Monk "Sponging Off" Buddhism*.

The rest of this book is available in print, by request:

<https://www.fgsitc.org/request-publications/>



Afterword by Daniel Han

*Venerable Master Hsing Yun Garner  
Admiration and Respect from People*

The Buddhism that I know possesses the longest history among the great religions of the world, and it is endowed with a broad aspiration and tolerance toward every ethnicity and religion.

The Fo Guang Shan that I know propagates the Dharma everywhere throughout the world, and it holds a broad sense of solicitude and transformative power toward society. It was founded and is led by Venerable Master Hsing Yun whom everyone honors and respects.

On February 14th of this year while the second “Colorful Yunnan”<sup>1</sup> exchange event was being conducted at Fo Guang Shan, I went to the Great Enlightenment Auditorium in the Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum to deliver a speech as a representative of the Kaohsiung municipal government. I said:

There are three kinds of people in the world who garner my admiration and respect: The first kind is the philanthropist, for they help the disadvantaged of society with their selflessness; the second kind is the politician, for they dedicate their mental and physical efforts to the enrichment of the nation and the

<sup>1</sup> A cultural exchange event about Yunnan Province, China; it included the exhibition of Yunnan’s ethnic clothing and accessories, as well as a dance performance.



Kaohsiung Mayor Daniel Han and his wife, Lee Chia-fen, with the Venerable Master at Fo Guang Shan Dharma Transmission Center.

Photo by Zhuang Mei Zhao, Nov. 14, 2018

strengthening of the people; the third kind is the religious leader, in that they employ their selflessness to liberate themselves and all sentient beings.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun is indeed the kind of religious leader of which I spoke. At the age of twenty-three and a monk for eleven years, he came to Taiwan from mainland China and inaugurated a period of unprecedented prosperity for Buddhism in Taiwan. Over the course of his eighty-one long years as a monk, he has conferred benefits upon human beings in this world, and his influence extends globally.

Once more in the company of the venerables at Fo Guang Shan, I was fortunate to pay a visit to the newly completed Sutra Repository, and I saw many treasured examples of the *One-Stroke Calligraphy* written by Venerable Master Hsing Yun. Among these were the “Four Givings”: the working principles of “giving people confidence, giving people joy, giving

people hope, and giving people convenience.” This is an article of faith for providing service that every organization should take seriously, which is so admirable! I think the working principles around “giving” constitute the core values within the Venerable Master’s new book, *I Am Not a Monk “Sponging Off” Buddhism*: illuminating oneself; bringing light to the human world; loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity; and devotion through sacrifice. I am able to be among the first in having the pleasure of reading this book, and besides feeling so honored, I am also especially willing to recommend it to all readers.

I often encourage others to read books. In my family, I want my children to do a great deal of reading, so they develop a reading habit. When I was in the service of the Taipei Agricultural Products Marketing Corporation, I would personally select books every month and distribute them to the six hundred workers. A cash award was further given for writing about what was learned from reading, my hope being that my colleagues would change their temperament through their reading. Now I hold the post of mayor for the city of Kaohsiung, but I still recommend a good book every month, and after reading, I also conduct solicitations among the people of the city for essays on what they learned. It is my hope that the promotion of reading will bring about the enhancement of the cultural undertones for Kaohsiung and the dissemination of an atmosphere for scholarship. For myself, it is mainly by means of a wide range of reading that I transformed my views on life, and it is also owing to the instructive and philosophical nature of books that I successfully overcame many failures and setbacks.

*I Am Not a Monk “Sponging Off” Buddhism* includes ten articles by the Venerable Master. Within them, I see Venerable Master’s selfless and lifelong dedication to Buddhism; I see how the Venerable Master embodies the humanistic Three Acts of Goodness, the code of moral principles of doing good deeds with one’s body, speaking good words in one’s speech, and thinking good thoughts in one’s mind; the Venerable Master’s good example of a silent revolution that he has established during these degenerate times; the Venerable Master’s humanistic character that creates broad affinities for a positive future and sentiment with righteousness; the Venerable Master’s free and easy magnanimity with which he meets hardship, setbacks, and the pain of sickness; and the Venerable Master’s bodhisattva spirit, which “cannot bear the sufferings of sentient beings nor the decline of the noble teachings.”

In the postscript “Trees Have Roots; Waters Have Sources—A Brief Description of My Relations and Hometown,” I saw the life of the Venerable Master, from when he was born to when he joined the monastic order on up to his propagating of the Dharma throughout the world. It is a somewhat complete record of his life’s circumstances and youth as well as the turning point that inspired the Venerable Master’s initial resolve and vows. During his younger years and his period of maturity, he faced so many horrific hardships. As for the particularly harsh and domineering monastic education, so many people gradually gave up under the beatings and scolding, the blows and shouts. On the contrary, it was by undergoing such repeated ordeals that the Venerable Master kindled the greatest and purest loving-kindness. The Venerable Master regards patience as strength, in that trials and tribulations allow us to

excel and foster courage and responsibility. This inspires us, for everyone possesses unlimited potential. By understanding self-awakening and self-contemplation, we can develop that most precious spirituality within human nature.

In having the pleasure to read the Venerable Master’s works, I feel deeply excited, for after all, these are pearls of wisdom coming from a monk approaching one hundred years of age, whose entire life has been tempered by undergoing all kinds of hardship. Thus, every sentence in the book constantly resonates with my spirit. Here I will quote a few sentences from this book so as to share what I have gained from reading them, but I also do so in the hopes that my humble remarks will lead others to follow suit.

1. The Venerable Master says, “The meaning of life’s existence cannot be separated from everyone as a whole, and it cannot be separated from contributions to society; otherwise, one is nothing but a rice bucket or a clothes rack. What value is there in that?”

My life has not been a smooth journey either, and I have experienced countless difficulties along the way. There was a seventeen-year period when I stayed alone in the mountains and let my mind settle down as the clouds rolled by. Only in this way did I gain some realizations somewhat akin to the Venerable Master’s. By perceiving one’s real feelings, the chessboard of human affairs can be clearly seen. Therefore, I hope to take my own hero’s journey, and even if the figure of that hero remains alone, the “complex mind and the simple heart” can always be preserved. This tranquility gives me the ability to spare no effort when dealing with public matters, and when facing the ever shifting and changing tumult of political



Kaohsiung Mayor Daniel Han and his wife, Lee Chia-fen, came to Fo Guang Shan to visit the Venerable Master. Mayor Han spoke of himself as a Buddhist, expressing gratitude toward *The Heart Sutra* for bringing peace to his mind and helping him transcend low points in his life. He recited *The Heart Sutra* and wished all Fo Guang Members well.

Photo by Zhuang Mei Zhao, Nov. 14, 2018

circles, I never forget the spirit of compassion that is loving-kindness and magnanimity.

In the year that the Venerable Master first arrived in Taiwan, he was penniless without a single possession, was snubbed everywhere, and suffered various kinds of unfair treatment; to be able to go from that predicament to his propagating of the Dharma around the world as the Buddha’s Light shines throughout the five continents is absolutely no coincidence. The aspirations and vows made by the great personages of the age and their unconditioned giving to the world can be compared to the sun of human wisdom shining everywhere, or like the sweet rains that provide moisture to all things. Then again, in response to my keeping a low profile for seventeen years, I perceived that we have the ability to

follow our real feelings so that we can have a chance to serve society and confer benefits upon the people. That would be the greatest merit for human life as well as a way of cultivating the bodhisattva path.

2. The Venerable Master says, “After a person is born, a person’s inherent nature has an inclination, which may be a source of energy for faith. But I make a distinction concerning faith; that is, I should have faith in what is good and not in what is bad; I should have faith in what is wholesome and not in what is unwholesome; I should believe in what is true and not in what is false.”

I think faith is the source of a person’s willpower and realizations about life, which are able to help us see through to the essence of life and seek out a standard for observing human affairs and things. We find ourselves constantly surrounded by what is good or bad, right or wrong, and we must be clear about what is true or false. In this, we absolutely should have the central values that faith establishes in us.

I remember that before the election, I did go to Fo Guang Shan to pay homage to the Buddha. During the Dharma service at that time, I gathered together with the Buddhist disciples. As for offering a blessing, I made an impromptu recitation of *The Heart Sutra* to encourage everyone. *The Heart Sutra* kept me company as I pulled through the deepest valleys of my life. The great wisdom of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva’s “mind without worry and obstruction” let me appreciate how there must be “the freedom of taking and letting go” in life, for no matter at what level one is living, one can cultivate anywhere and anytime. Every single person can have the sunlight within

their hearts so that together we can illuminate each other and join together in increasing the radiance of the world.

3. The Venerable Master says, “Tribulation can nurture us mentally and physically, and adversity can increase our strength, but joy alone constitutes the most important treasure in human life.”

I recall the phrase “The world is breakable, but passion cannot be broken.” During the electioneering process, I once made the rounds on a dozen or more stops in one day and did not even have any time for meals. My weight decreased from 154 pounds to 132 pounds, and on many occasions, I became exhausted and vomited owing to my electioneering, much to the detriment of my health. But what supported me in continuing to complete the daily election itinerary was the enthusiasm and confidence demonstrated by the many city residents of Kaohsiung when they came out to see me. This motivated me to roll up my sleeves once more and put forth more vigorous efforts. After I assumed the office of Kaohsiung’s mayor, I became filled with gratitude that I could shoulder the ardent hopes of its 2.78 million residents and join with the city government team and the city’s residents in creating the future of “a soaring Kaohsiung and a rising south.”<sup>2</sup> For this reason, I am profoundly touched by the Venerable Master’s unswerving determination and sense of responsibility with which he made the vow “I will have Buddhism depend upon me” at the age of twenty-three. It is just like my taking on the forging of Kaohsiung’s three mountain districts of Gangshan, Fengshan, and Chishan into “a mountain of gold, mountain of silver, and mountain of reliance” for the sake of the city residents.

<sup>2</sup> Kaohsiung is located in southern Taiwan.

I am elated because now that *I Am Not a Monk “Sponging Off” Buddhism* is published, I can have a heart-to-heart talk with the Venerable Master as I read through the book. I have found this book to be profoundly moving for me; every word and every sentence offer infinite sparks of realization. The book deserves to be read carefully again and again and should always be kept handy on the desktop, so one can open it and browse through it from time to time. I once encouraged young students to “establish a foothold in Taiwan, keep China in the heart, take a broad view of the world, and tame the universe.” The Venerable Master’s moral conduct as demonstrated in this book—how he positively exerts himself, puts demands upon himself, makes painstaking and patient efforts, dares to innovate, and works everywhere for the sake of others—deserves of study and emulation by young people.

I think that Taiwan’s ability to have such a great religious teacher like Venerable Master Hsing Yun and its ability to have the most magnificent Buddhist temples on a global scale, such as Fo Guang Shan and the Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum, that bless and protect the mass of people, represent merit for everyone in Taiwan. This is something that we should cherish!

Former Mayor of Kaohsiung

## Chinese Editor’s Remarks

### *Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s Blessing*

At the beginning of 2016, we began editing the *Complete Works of Venerable Master Hsing Yun*, comprising altogether more than thirty million Chinese characters in three hundred and sixty-five volumes under twelve major topics. With the Venerable Master being an author and an editor himself, our editorial team for the *Complete Works* were able to receive the Venerable Master’s guidance at all times and were naturally able to resolve many problems with ease.

In October of that same year, owing to his brain hemorrhage and surgical treatment, the Venerable Master was granted the blessings of the Triple Gem and accorded the protection of the Dharma guardians, so his restoration to health was extraordinarily successful. In the face of the concern for him coming from all quarters, the Venerable Master said, “I haven’t taken ill, nor is there any pain; I am simply inconvenienced a little bit.” During his convalescence, the Venerable Master continued rendering his *One-Stroke Calligraphy*, and he inaugurated the Seeds of Hope Project to help young people and teenagers successfully attend school. He gave instruction on *Buddha-Dharma: Pure and Simple* to those who came seeking teachings from him, and he initiated the propagating of Dharma teachings through speeches and Buddhist music.

Because of the Venerable Master’s concern for the nation and society along with the needs of the people, he published a series of articles in the *United Daily News* and the *China Times*, such as “Enemies—They Can Become Friends by Stimulating Our Potential, so There’s Nothing to Fear,” “I Can Call Myself a Taiwanese-Chinese Monk,” “I Am Not a Monk ‘Sponging Off’ Buddhism,” and so on, lending his voice for the sake of the people’s happiness and well-being and for the sake of justice and fairness in the world. It was also because of these articles that an enthusiastic discussion was touched off in the media and society. This led to a large-scale response on the part of readers, at home and abroad, who sent in droves of letters requesting the publication of a book. Thus, this is why the book *I Am Not a Monk “Sponging Off” Buddhism* came to greet the public.

Throughout his life, the Venerable Master has placed a dual emphasis on understanding and practice, becoming the finest example for all who have set their minds on the study and practice of the truth. After repeated discussions, the editorial group decided to make “I Am Not a Monk ‘Sponging Off’ Buddhism” the central focus and compile a book of Dharma essentials that were “spoken by the Buddha and are needed by the people—all that is pure, good, and beautiful” for the sake of both monastic and lay practitioners as well as interested people in society. Within the Buddha’s light and the Dharma waters,<sup>1</sup> all people will be able to turn affliction into *bodhi* and turn darkness into light; by conducting ourselves in this way, we are able to walk along the road of hope and joy.

Practice is the only way to assess the truth. This entire book is composed of ten essays focusing on the Venerable Master’s

<sup>1</sup> Buddha’s light relates to wisdom, and the Dharma waters relate to purification.

upbringing, faith, aspiration, teaching, and realization. These are divided into three units—“For Buddhism,” “The Progress of Faith,” and “Diligent Efforts Will Not Be Wasted”—which relate in detail to the nearly hundred-year course of the Venerable Master’s life. In order to promote Humanistic Buddhism, he begins with his initial resolve and then experiences all kinds of disasters and calamities to reach a lifetime of joy and happiness, and throughout it all “even if there are millions upon millions of obstacles, [he] will still go forward!” Adhering to the principle of “not ‘sponging off’ Buddhism,” the Venerable Master has committed himself to not depend upon Buddhism for making a living and has vowed to have “Buddhism depend upon [him]” and to “glorify Buddhism.” He has become a person who is able to give, who enhances the beauty and goodness of the world, and who is willing to devote himself through sacrifice.

Generally, most often, people mistakenly believe that the cultivation of Buddhism is something like a steep and perilous peak that is difficult to climb, or it is like a thousand-foot-deep valley where one fears slipping and falling. In his essay “My Progress of Faith,” the Venerable Master employs the insights from his own experience to enable us to understand and believe in Humanistic Buddhism. Spiritual cultivation begins with living, and as long as we can “have loving-kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity, and the mind without abiding,” we will give rise to limitless Dharma joy and meditative bliss and be in possession of a completely different human life.

The postscript “Trees Have Roots; Waters Have Sources—A Brief Description of My Relations and Hometown” was selected for inclusion at the end of the book, and this essay enables the reader to seemingly accompany the Venerable Master as a youngster to experience that time of war and join with his



Courageously realize that “I am Buddha” and life will be different.

maternal grandmother in fleeing through the chaos of armies in the midst of battle. One comes to realize the liberal view on life and death, “Do not panic when facing death.”

One could say that besides being a paragon of encouragement for everybody, *I Am Not a Monk “Sponging Off” Buddhism* is also a treasury for spiritual cultivation that helps us to join in as practitioners of Humanistic Buddhism. It is also a blessing that the Venerable Master offers to the world, as he wishes fervently for everyone to be able to improve themselves, develop the harmony of joy within themselves, the harmony of respect between self and other, the harmony of cooperation within the family, then onto the harmony of unity in society and the harmony of peace throughout the world.



The *Complete Works of Venerable Master Hsing Yun* (shown partially).

Photo by Su Shaoyang



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## Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center

Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center is dedicated to translating and distributing quality translations of classical Buddhist texts as well as works by contemporary Buddhist teachers and scholars. We embrace Humanistic Buddhism and promote Buddhist writing that is accessible, community-oriented, and relevant to daily life. On [FGSITC.org](http://FGSITC.org) you can browse all of our publications, read them online and even download them for FREE, as well as request printed copies for you or your organization.