

Paving My Way to International Status 我怎樣走上國際的道路

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 was born in Jiangsu Province, China in 1927. He has 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 1952, 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, Da Tzu Children's Home, 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 Modern Language, Fo Guang Textbooks, Essential Guides to Buddhism, 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 continues 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 having "the Buddha's light shining throughout the three thousand realms, and the Dharma water flowing across the five continents."



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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. Since I, a humble monk, am also somewhat connected with Tzu Chi since I attended the groundbreaking ceremony of 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 critique of Tzu Chi and even Buddhism itself continued to worsen, I therefore extended into the third, fourth, and then all the way to the 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*' 15th 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 them—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.

Hing yun

May 16th, 2015 Fo Guang Shan Monastery, Founding Master's Quarters



Paving My Way to International Status

Holding the compassionate vow to liberate sentient beings, One is like an unmoored boat upon the

One is like an unmoored boat upon the Dharma Ocean;

What merit and virtue have I accomplished in this lifetime?

Peace and happiness shine upon the five continents.



Since childhood, I have realized that I lack wholesome causes and conditions to build a good future, so my earliest ambition as a monk was to be the head of rice cooking in the monastery. I aspired to this because I received good compliments during my occasional service as a cook at Qixiashan and Jiaoshan, which made me feel that I do have some cooking skills.

Cooking Rice to Develop Affinity with the Assembly

Having served as a chef who cooks rice allowed me to develop good affinities with the assembly on a daily basis, which was also a joy in life. As time went on, I came to realize that the cause for the fall and corruption of Buddhism was a lack of talent, lack of education, and lack of young people. Therefore I resolved to one day contribute to Buddhist culture and education. Still, it was only a small thought, which I dare not say was anything of great ambition or aspiration.

In 1963, the Republic of China appointed me as leader of the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China's Mission to Southeast Asia. Those countries were also home to the Chinese community with a gathering of fans who admired me for my writings, but I personally was not largely influenced by the fans. For my reflections on those trips and more details, please refer to my book *Over the Sky, A Journey Abroad*.

Vowing to Propagate Buddhism, Encouraging Young People to Learn Foreign Languages

In 1975, after establishing Fo Guang Shan, I was again assigned by the government to represent Buddhists by visiting the United States for America's Bicentennial. Suddenly, my horizon was broadened, which inspired me to undertake an important career for Buddhism; that is, it inspired me to vow to let the Buddha's Light shine universally, and let the Dharma stream flow eternally across the



five continents. From then on, I have vowed that, regardless of success or failure, I will do nothing but propagate Buddhism all over the world and will never seek my own well-being. For this reason, Fo Guang Shan's objective has been to promote monastic education in order to foster international Dharma propagators.

Some forty to fifty years ago in Taiwan, there were very few young Buddhists who could speak English. For any student who showed interest in learning English, I would reward them with a monthly allowance of two hundred New Taiwan dollars. In order to disseminate Buddhism and to communicate with the world, people who are talented in language abilities or have international backgrounds are essential. Therefore, whenever opportunities arose, I would encourage the students to go on a pilgrimage to India and strengthen their faith in Buddhism, or to travel to Europe to broaden their horizons. To my surprise, the process was harder than I thought, but since it was my intention and vow, success and failure did not matter at all.

Almost Failing to Construct an Overseas Temple

The path to international Dharma propagation began when Wang Liang-hsin, a devotee in America, called from Los Angeles to tell us that he wished to donate a piece of land and wanted me to send someone to construct a temple. Back in those days, many devotees from both the United States and Canada wished to donate temples and lands to me, but I never dared to make a rash decision because I was worried that we did not have enough professional Dharma propagators. In the past, many devotees offered me land, such as Ying Jin Yu-tang (Annie Ying) of New York who offered me Da Cheng Temple and also Chan Le-wu from Canada who offered me a 170-acre plot of land near Niagara Falls to build an International Buddhist Dharma Center. Under Wang Liang-hsin's continuous urges, I raised USD\$20,000 and sent Venerable Tzu Chuang, who speaks Japanese, and Venerable Yi Hang, who speaks English, to the United States to establish a Buddhist monastery. Devotees were so



excited that they even organized a farewell banquet for them at the Grand Hotel in Taipei.

After arriving in the United States and doing some investigation, they realized that according to the law, the land was not within a religious district, and we were only permitted to build houses over the land instead of temples. Back then, it cost at least \$100,000 to build a house in America, and with only \$20,000, how would it have been possible for us to construct a monastery? The two of them decided that they may as well return to Taiwan, so they called me to explain the difficulty of the situation and suggested that it was best to come home. In response, I immediately warned them, "You already had a huge farewell banquet at the Grand Hotel of Taipei; how can you face the friends and folks of Taiwan if you return emptyhanded? Just wait for a few more days. Venerable Hsin Ting and I are on our way to America."

It turned out that the land donated by the devotee could not be used to construct a temple, and if we were to purchase a house, it would cost about a few hundred thousand dollars. Fo Guang Shan only had a budget of \$20,000 for this project, so how was it possible for us to build a temple? As a result, we drove around the streets of Los Angeles in Wang Lianghsin's car. On the evening of the third day, when we passed by a particular street, Venerable Tzu Chuang pointed at a small church and said, "This church is up for sale for \$200,000." I told them that we should take a look at the place, but she objected, "Why go in if we do not intend to buy it?" In my opinion, it would not hurt to get some idea of what a \$200,000 church looked like.

After checking out the church, we discovered that it could accommodate more than 100 people with a reception room and an office. Aside from these, there was a dormitory for a family of four or five and a small nursery room. In addition, there were parking spaces for about forty cars. It truly did seem fit to be our starting place in America. However, \$200,000 was indeed an astronomical value. Wang Liang-hsin then suggested, "Why don't you apply for a bank loan?"



Borrowing Money to Turn a Church into Hsi Lai Temple

Up until this point in my life, I never borrowed money or asked for a loan, so upon hearing the words "bank loan," my heart immediately sank with disappointment. When we began constructing Fo Guang Shan, we tried to apply for bank loans, but were declined by the bank who told us that "Monasteries are not allowed to apply for a loan." Could it be that the laws differed in the United States? We had no choice but to accept Wang Liang-hsin's suggestions and made a trip to the bank.

When the manager of Bank of America heard that we would like to apply for a loan, he personally came to receive us and agreed on the loan. I told him that we do not have any guarantor, and the manager was very surprised and asked, "Why do you need a guarantor? Isn't the church you are buying the best guarantor?" After hearing his words, I could not believe such good news. I asked him if it was still possible to apply for a loan if we did not own

a residence in United States. He replied, "This does not matter as we have our branch office in Taiwan, so you can pay the instalments from there." Then, we used the \$20,000 for the down payment and reconstructed the church as a temple named "Hsi Lai Temple," which means that Chinese Buddhism is coming to the West. In terms of constructing a temple abroad, Fo Guang Shan successfully took its first big step forward.

In the West, turning a church into a temple was no strange matter. However, in the process of Dharma propagation, we did face some challenges. Westerners went home to eat after attending a service, but for the Chinese, after their visit to the monastery, they were unwilling to leave without eating a vegetarian meal. With our small kitchen that could only fit seven or eight people, how was it possible to treat devotees to a meal? Meanwhile, we were faced with yet another challenge of not owning a car in United States, which made it impossible for us to get around so we could get to know the community. We could not even afford to buy a television set; how



was it possible for us to know what was happening in the world? Although we were living in the United States, a country known to be open and free, we felt like we were locked in a retreat room.

Simplicity, Tax Exemption—Our Starting Points in America

Venerables Tzu Chuang and Yi Hang proved themselves to be very capable. On the second day, without spending a penny, they came home with a twelve-seater van. The van cost \$10,000 and \$500 in taxes, but the car dealer told them that religious organizations receive tax exemptions, so he refunded them \$500. The cost of the van, which came out to \$9,500, could be repaid in monthly installments. This was indeed a great wonder as they managed to buy a car without paying a deposit, instead earning a \$500 tax refund.

At a department store not far from the temple, we made an inquiry to the salesman, "How much does a television cost?" He replied "\$450." We told him that we would come back when we had the money to

buy it. To our surprise, the next morning, the television set was delivered to our door and the man even told us that it only cost \$400 because religious organizations are entitled to a tax exemption, and thus refunded us the \$50. To me, America is really like a heaven in which life can be so wonderful! No wonder so many people wish to immigrate to the United States. It makes sense after all!

So, we settled in this small church and began our endeavors of Dharma propagation in the United States. When the monastics from over twenty countries heard about the news, they all came to celebrate with joy. Fortunately, I have some cooking experience, so I prepared a feast for them with just a frying pan. Having enjoyed the meal, they even volunteered to help out with the development of Hsi Lai Temple.

Using the Name "Pai Ta" to Commemorate My Ancestral Temple

However, later developments were not as smooth. As the number of devotees continued to grow, the



church soon became too small for a dining space. Therefore we found another church in Maywood with good dining facilities and named it Pai Ta (White Pagoda) Temple, which was to commemorate my ancestral temple — Paitashan (White Pagoda Mountain). Sometime later, due to similar issues, we had to purchase a 14-acre horse ranch, eventually Hsi Lai Temple was built. For the past 20 years, we have had Venerables Tzu Chuang, Hsin Ting, Yi Kong, Tzu Jung, Hui Chuan, Hsin Bao, and Hui Dong serve as abbot or abbess of Hsi Lai Temple.

Later developments in Canada and Europe were not so smooth either. For example, after spending two weeks on the streets of London and Paris, Venerable Tzu Chuang felt the need to establish temples in Europe. However, when the British and French first heard that Taiwanese people had come to rent and buy homes, they all declined politely. It seemed that Europeans still had a strong sense of ethnic and racial differences, but finally, in 1991, we rented a 35-square-foot room located above a department store in Paris. About 10 people from Taiwan

gathered to begin establishing our Dharma propagation endeavors in Europe and America.

Starting in Canada with \$2,000

Once, when I was in Toronto, having seen such a vast expanse of land, parks, and the availability of vacant spaces, thoughts of establishing temples in Canada came to mind. In Taiwan, it is extremely difficult to find a piece of land to build even a presidential office building; on the other hand, there would be no problem at all if we wanted to build a hundred of those in Canada. Thus I felt the need to build a temple in Canada.

We happened to be traveling on a tour bus at that time, so I pointed out the window and asked, "Who is willing to stay on this great land and build a temple?" Venerable Yi Hong raised her hands and replied, "I am." She had graduated from Hung Kuang Institute of Medical and Nursing Technology in Taichung and understood some English. Upon hearing that, I said, "That is great!" Then I asked the bus driver to pull over, gave her \$2,000, and told Venerable Yi Hong to



get off the bus right there. She got off the bus without further ado, and the tour bus continued to drive on. Fo Guang Shan thus began its development in Toronto. Though we did not have clear objectives or goals, with something as simple as resolution, we nevertheless progressed step by step.

Years later, I visited Europe and America frequently. In order for Buddhism to gain international status and establish temples across the globe, aside from people who speak many languages and have talents, time is needed for the right conditions to be present. It is not possible to reach the sky in a single bound. For this reason, I developed a plan for Dharma propagation in Europe and North America.

I told my disciples that they must first get to know their local devotees and win their hearts and trust. By doing so, they will gain the support of these devotees. They can rent a motel room first and then negotiate with devotees to borrow their living rooms once a week to conduct home visits. Most devotees would take this as a good idea. However, this can only last for two to three months until they

start to feel that we are occupying their home space. Furthermore, Western families may consist of members of different faiths, and we must not disrupt their family life.

The second step would be to utilize devotees' garages by hanging an image of the Buddha from a wall. They can then begin to give Dharma talks and conduct chanting services. If this was done on a weekly basis, in two to three months' time, with the number of devotees reaching thirty, then they can take the third step by suggesting the rental of a larger gathering space with washroom and tearoom facilities in order to make everyone more comfortable. If all thirty or forty devotees agree to the idea, they might even raise funds to rent such a place.

With a temporary venue, the gatherings need to continue for a year with a regular turn out of seventy or even a hundred people; then the group will be strong enough, and through collective effort will make it easier to accomplish a goal. If you lack the ability to do so and fail to win the support of devotees, then the dream of building a temple will not



be possible. However, if you are skillful enough in establishing a community of a hundred people, then these people will naturally wish for a bigger space for cultivation. Subsequently, they will initiate the fundraising to purchase a land and build a temple. Penny and penny laid upon will be many, and we will start to really take off in Europe, the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and even Africa. This way, we will be able to truly realize the ideal, "May Buddha's light shine universally, and the Dharma stream flow eternally across the five continents."

Overcoming all Obstacles by the Power of Vows

Throughout the aforementioned process, many touching stories have happened, but due to limited space, I will not elaborate on them here. The establishment of He Hua Temple in Holland has quite an astonishing story, while the location where our London temple is built over was what used to be a nunnery. In Brazil, Chang Sheng-kai gave up his own residence to build

a temple, and in Australia, the general manager of a steel company in Wollongong personally came to Fo Guang Shan to extend an invitation to build a temple there, so Venerable Tzu Jung took on the mission and went over there by herself.

I do not have any special talents, so I can only progress step by step and strive forward despite hardship and poverty. Today, under the hard work of Fo Guang Shan's young monastics, we now have temples in London, Berlin, Paris, Madrid, Sydney, and other major cities around the world. Certainly, it would not have been possible for hundreds of temples to be built within just fifty years without the support of our devotees and the Chinese community who reside in each country. I humbly present the following verse to express my gratitude across the seventy years of my life as a monastic:

Holding the compassionate vow to liberate sentient beings,

One is like an unmoored boat upon the

Dharma Ocean:



What merit and virtue have I accomplished in this lifetime?

Peace and happiness shine upon the five continents.

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