

# Tzu Chi: Master Cheng Yen's Socially Engaged Buddhism in Taiwan

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The term “Socially Engaged Buddhism” refers to active involvement by Buddhists in society and its problems. Those who participate in this nascent movement seek to implement and actualize the traditional Buddhist ideals of wisdom and compassion in the modern world. In other words, Socially Engaged Buddhism, applies these ideals to social issues of peace and justice, environmental degradation, human and animal rights, community-building and the provision of care to those in need. Such an application has been carried out quite successfully by Sulak Sivaraksa in Thailand, Ariyaratane in Sri Lanka, Thich Naht Hahn in Vietnam and France, and Master Cheng Yen in Taiwan. Master Cheng Yen's movement appears to be the most successful experimentation in Socially Engaged Buddhism not only because it is run by a woman in Taiwan, but also because it has further humanized and indigenized Taiwanese Buddhism. Tzu-chi manifests itself not only as an example of engaged Buddhism, but also as a case of engaged Buddhism's response to globalization: it adapts its efforts to globalization and hence brings Buddhist symbols to the global arena.<sup>1</sup>

The *Buddhist Compassion Tzu Chi Foundation*, (known in short as *Tzu Chi*)<sup>2</sup> founded by Master Cheng Yen in 1966 is a voluntary, non-governmental, non-profit, non-sectarian, non-political lay Buddhist organization under monastic leadership. Instead of spending too much time on prayers, burning incense, or reading sūtras, she exhorts her disciples, to ‘humanize Buddhism’ by ‘just doing it.’ She claims that the Buddhism practised and preached by her is the original form of Buddhism, which is simple and down-to-earth. Furthermore, she advocates that a woman's world is not within the boundaries of her home. She and the other nuns grow their own food, run workshops and do not live on any material support of lay followers. Her unique experiments in frugality, avoidance of wastage, and recycling have provided a new dimension to *Buddhism in action*. A ferry circled by a blossoming lotus of eight petals is the symbol of Tzu Chi. Whereas the ferry stands for Dharma and universal salvation, the eight petals symbolize the eight correct paths of practice that blossom into wisdom. The symbol of universal salvation is printed on the flags in front of all its mission buildings and is worn on the clothing of its thousands of commissioners and volunteers. Tzu Chi is at present the largest formal NGO in Taiwan. It runs two state-of-the-art 900-bed hospitals, a university, a high school, and a Television channel in Taiwan. This organization raised over US \$300 million during the year 1999 alone<sup>3</sup> and now controls over NT 18.6 billion (approximately US \$0.6 billion) in funds.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper, an attempt is made to evaluate the character of Tzu Chi-style engaged Buddhism

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<sup>1</sup>C. Julia Huang, “The Buddhist Tzu-chi Foundation of Taiwan,” C. Queen, C. Prebish, and D. Keown (eds), *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*, New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003: 137.

<sup>2</sup>“Tzu” means *Love and Kindness*, and “Chi” means *Mercy*.

<sup>3</sup>*Business Weekly*, 24 July 2000: 72.

<sup>4</sup>Himalaya Foundation, *Foundations in Taiwan*, Taipei: Zhonghua Zhengxin She, 1997: 10.

and its long term consequences in a post-modern world with its problems of war and conflict, gender discrimination, human and animal rights, wastage, pollution, and ecological degradation.

Wang Chin-yun, now known as Master Cheng Yen, gave up home life to become a Buddhist nun in 1960 at the age of 23. In her early twenties, her vision was forged by a series of events that were to shape her life.<sup>5</sup> First, her mother's serious illness due to tumour in the stomach (from which she recovered) brought her in touch with the realities of life. Full of gratitude, she became a vegetarian, a traditional Chinese method of cultivating merits for someone who is ill or in trouble. Then, her father died suddenly of a heart attack, seriously distressing her when her lack of knowledge made her unable to properly care for him. Then she was appalled that the poor of Taiwan could not get medical care. This, compounded with her own fragile health, moved her to give up her comfortable life to become a Buddhist nun. But also during her early years of wandering experimentation, she came to realize that she could not become a novice nun and obey the master's orders while waiting painfully for the slow promotion to eventually bring her the powers to do things her way. Thus, what she truly wanted was a temple of her own and a group of followers to carry out her ideas, but it was beyond her reach at this moment; therefore, she had no choice but to move from one temple to another. She is still the head of a small Buddhist temple in Taiwan, but her generous followers have now grown to over four million and more than 200,000 active volunteers.<sup>6</sup> Her organization is involved within Taiwan and internationally and provides assistance during peaceful times as well as disaster by sending food, clothing, and housing materials directly to people in need by building hospitals, colleges, research centers, and developing educational, social, and cultural programs. Tzu Chi also actively advocates a life-style which has fewer needs, is frugal, is less wasteful, and is environmentally less reprehensible. She and her colleagues have set personal examples by living simple lives with only the basic necessities, and have actively pursued the work of helping the poor and the needy. She received the Magsaysay Award, known as the Asian Nobel Prize, in 1991 and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 for her selfless dedication to helping others and for bringing to a troubled world a renewed vision of compassion in action. She has also received the Eisenhower Medallion for her contributions to world peace. Some call her *the Mother Teresa of Asia* and the *Red Cross of China*— where everyone knows her name. In 2000, a textbook for high school students in Canada devoted one chapter to Tzu Chi and Cheng Yen as an exemplary religious influence.<sup>7</sup>

Cheng Yen's heart disease limits her travel abroad but not her dauntless activism. Daily at the headquarters, she gives sermons to hospital volunteers who come from different parts of Taiwan and from abroad; oversees and directs Tzu Chi's domestic and international missions; and grants audience to international journalists and foreign dignitaries. At least once a month, she travels around Taiwan preaching at Tzu Chi branches and public stadiums; she meets as a grass-roots fund-raiser and negotiator with state officials; and, as the roving CEO of a modern organization, she examines local mission

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<sup>5</sup>Some of the experiences that she underwent as a young woman form part of most fascinating and heart touching experiences undergone by a beautiful and young woman wandering around in search of a place to realize her dreams. A book written by one of her admirers in 1995 (Yu-ing Ching, *Master of Love and Mercy: Cheng Yen*, 3<sup>rd</sup> print, Taipei: Still Thoughts Publications, 2003) details an engrossing and moving account of her encounters with hope and despair, with her coming on top every time through sheer single-minded dedication and faith in herself. It is no doubt that, account of her budding years as well as that of some of her associates and disciples, in this book, leaves the reader spell-bound.

<sup>6</sup>"Tzu Chi Treasury of 2002," *Tzu Chi: Buddhism in Action*, Vol 10, no. 2, Spring 2003 (<http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/2003sp/qp8.htm>).

<sup>7</sup>Barry Corbin, John Trites, and James Taylor, "Master Cheng Yen," *Global Connections: Geography for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1999: 408.

developments and recruits new professional staff. Cheng Yen's book, *Still Thoughts*, has inspired numerous readers to join on Tzu Chi's Buddhist path and has become a manual of maxims for lay followers to practice Tzu Chi as "a highly rationalized and moralistic Buddhism;" for many it is the holy scripture of engaged Buddhism. The *Pure Abode of Still Thoughts* (also called *Jing Si Abode*) is the residence of Master Cheng Yen and her monastic disciples, the spiritual home of Tzu Chi volunteers around the world, and the birthplace of the Tzu Chi Foundation. She and her disciples have built this place through their private earnings. Life at the Jing Si Abode is considerably different from other places of spiritual cultivation in that all the residents are kept busy with work and the pace of life is quick. All the daily tasks are rotated every 10 days. When monastic residents are assigned to kitchen duty, they insure that the kitchen and all utensils are kept clean, the food is healthy and tasty, and nothing is wasted. They prepare meals for all Abode residents, as well as the numerous summer and winter camp participants, people on the 'Tzu Chi Tours' and various visitors from all over the world. Residents attend to farming duties, and sometimes they package bean powder. The farm duties also include uprooting weeds, planting vegetables, gathering firewood, tidying the environment, cleaning the gutters and the garbage zone, etc. At the Abode, the nuns live simply and implement the spirit of cherishing their natural surroundings. The nuns have developed a life ethic, in which their lives are carried out with concern for the earth. Recognizing that all living creatures in this world live interdependently with each other, the nuns do not use pesticides in the vegetable garden at the Abode, but instead nourish the plants with natural fertilizer. Kitchen wastes are composted for organic fertilizer. The garden creates its own compost as well: the leaves and stems of the garden's beans are edible, and the roots decompose, returning their organic components to nature as fertilizer.

The fourfold core area of interest of Tzu Chi, called the *Four Missions*, consists of charity, medicine, education and culture. In recent years, Tzu Chi has expanded its activities to include bone marrow donation, international relief, environmental protection and community volunteering. These eight activities put together are called the *Eight Footprints*.<sup>8</sup> Tzu Chi receives its funds solely from the public, and its various charity works are all carried out by volunteers. This structure has ensured that funds are properly used. Although obtaining handsome financial support from all walks of life, she and her followers still earn money cent by cent, making hand-made craft products such as candles and baby shoes to maintain their living. In accordance with the Buddhist concept that "one hand works as one thousand hands and one eye sees as one thousand eyes," thousands of Tzu Chi Commissioners<sup>9</sup> follow in her footsteps, serving as the eyes and hands of Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy, the commissioners seek out the sick and the poor to help them and solicit donations for the foundation. She says,

"If each of us cares only about ourselves, then suffering beings will never be saved. If only I could mobilize 500 people to join me and help the less fortunate, the combined strength would then be like Kuan Yin, the Bodhisattva with a thousand eyes to see the suffering in the world and a thousand hands to reach out and help. With that thought in mind, I rejected the idea of self-salvation and founded the Buddhist Tzu Chi Merit Association."<sup>10</sup>

She began her activities in 1962 from a small wooden hut behind the Pu Ming Temple. Although life at the hut was very hard, she and her colleagues embraced the conviction to "work willingly and accept

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<sup>8</sup><http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/book/book2/3.htm>.

<sup>9</sup>All those who donate more than NT\$ 1,000,000 are designated as Commissioners of Tzu Chi.

<sup>10</sup>"The Four Immeasurable Minds: Tzu Chi emphasizes putting the Buddha's teachings into action," *Tzu Chi: Buddhism in Action*, Vol 11, no. 1, Spring 2004 (<http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/2004sp/qp8.htm>).

the results happily.” They were busy, but their lives were fulfilling. They worked in the fields during the day and studied at night. Sometimes their studies were interrupted during busy farming seasons. They studied together, and did not hold religious services nor give sermons. With barely enough shelter and hardly enough to eat, the Master still held firm to her decision not to accept offerings from others. Their rule was, “A day without working is a day without eating.” They relied on their own efforts: they knitted sweaters and gloves, stitched bags to hold animal feed, sewed baby shoes and planted vegetables. Through hard work, they met the basic necessities of life. She believes that nuns and monks should work hard to earn their keep instead of living on the donations of followers.

When in February 1963, she went to Taipei to register for a 32-day “novitiate” to formally become a Buddhist nun, she was rejected as she had already shaved her head herself. However, a short while later, the famous Master Yin Shun consented to be her teacher. From that day onwards, she decided to dedicate her life to humanize Buddhism. “All lives are equal, and therefore deserve to be loved and respected equally. And the Buddha exists in all the living beings, whether the being takes the physical form of a person, a fish, a cat or a dog. And the spirit of a dog can be just as noble as the spirit of a human, or even more admirable!”<sup>11</sup> This philosophy forms the basis of the following *Eight Footprints* of Tzu-Chi:

## 1. CHARITY

Her mission of charity began when she requested the original thirty households to drop 50 cents (less than US\$0.02) a day in a tiny bamboo box kept in their kitchens, rather than a once a month contribution of NT\$15. Although the fifty cents may not have been of great value, it served to develop and nurture the spirit of helping and caring every day. From her perspective, thirty acts of giving were more significant than a single one. She saw the value of developing the spirit of giving in these members as equal in importance to achieving the task at hand. She holds the conviction that each of her projects, whether it was the establishment of hospitals, colleges, and research center, be completed through the joint efforts of many, rather than by a few generous benefactors. Her commissioners, through a well organized net work visit the homes of poor and sick to cheer them and see if they need food or money. Starting with five nuns, and fifty cents of daily savings from thirty households, Master Cheng Yen pursued her mission of helping the poor and ‘educating’ the prosperous. Under her guidance, Tzu Chi works with and represents people from all walks of life. In the spirit of ‘There is no one I do not love, trust, or forgive,’ she seeks to help make this world one of kindness, compassion, joy, and equality by relieving the material and physical suffering of the needy, and guiding the Tzu Chi volunteers toward personal and spiritual growth. According to her, improvements in society do not come from society itself but from its members. It is through personal growth that profound changes can be possible on the greater level of society. She sees the individual as the crucial agent for change. This awakening in a person comes from the nurturing of compassion. She points out that the secret behind her success is “Faith in myself, that my intentions were pure. And faith in others, that within the heart of every person lies love that is only waiting to be awakened.” Her certainty that those who share the same vision would join their efforts to hers has allowed her to take on and succeed at many difficult projects. “A giver must be grateful to the receiver. When your gratefulness is sincere, the receiver will know that you are not only giving him a gift, but also your respect.”<sup>12</sup> “There is no such thing as an insignificant amount of contribution. Both fifty cents and fifty million are equal in value as

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32. <sup>11</sup>Yu-ing Ching, *Master of Love and Mercy: Cheng Yen*, 3<sup>rd</sup> print, Taipei: Still Thoughts Publications, 2003:

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*: 133.

long as both the givers are truly sincere.”<sup>13</sup> Further, she has made a rule that whoever wishes to be a follower, must also be a Tzu-chi member— not only in name but also in action, giving time or funds or both. However, the funds of the Foundation are always separated from the funds of the temple. Though the Tzu Chi Foundation has prospered but she and her disciples continue to live in poverty.

## 2. MEDICINE

One day in 1966, she went to visit a follower at a hospital, and saw a pool of blood on the ground left by a woman who could not afford treatment for a miscarriage. The pain caused by seeing the blood was the catalyst for her to establish the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation.<sup>14</sup> Not only her hospitals at Hualien and Dalian provide the latest medical assistance to all strata of the society, but her Tzu Chi University also produces doctors, nurses, and other para-medics. The doctors, nurses, para-medics, patients, and volunteers work like closely knit family members. The successful attempts at mutual trust and sincerity between doctors and patients as well as her principle of universal mercy and compassion has made her medical system a quintessential example of dedication to an important social issue. The Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA) was established in October 1996, consisting of Tzu Chi volunteers and medical professionals from hospitals and clinics all over the island. They regularly hold free clinics and conduct free physical examinations for residents of remote areas, street people, and aborigines living in cities. Talking about her hospitals, she says: “Illness is one of the many unavoidable sufferings between birth and death, and we should do all we can to help the sick feel less miserable... (moreover)... patients should never be treated as numbers, but always as noble human beings,”<sup>15</sup> because “a Buddhist hospital is a hospital of love, like a temple, curing not only the sick bodies but also the wounded hearts.”<sup>16</sup>

## 3. EDUCATION

She points out that as in the recent decades Taiwan has experienced the jolt of excessively rapid economic growth, it has literally gone to the verge of spiritual collapse. Thus, people need to understand the harmful affects of chasing after materialism and advises the rich through her speeches to avoid extravagance. “Greed is a bottomless pit that can never be filled up. When we rein in our minds with the precepts, we will not be troubled by worries over gains and losses. Such contentment frees us from afflictions and brings us emancipation.”<sup>17</sup> She believes that the human mind needs to be educated in order to have the wisdom to work for the good of all. “Most of the disasters and calamities in this world are created by people who have complete body and limbs but incomplete mind and spirit.”<sup>18</sup> “Having a deformed body is not real suffering. Real suffering is being deformed in mind and character.”<sup>19</sup> In her view the promise of the future for all human beings lies in their access to education and capacity for learning and, thus, “A good school should place equal emphasis on skills and moral value.”<sup>20</sup> “Wisdom is an inner force that is kind and virtuous. It shows in a person’s proficiency to

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<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*: 21.

<sup>14</sup>Peter Faun, *The Miracle World of Compassion*, Taipei: Tzu Chi Cultural Mission, 1991: 10.

<sup>15</sup>Yu-ing Ching, *Op. Cit.*: 80.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*: 83.

<sup>17</sup>“The Four Immeasurable Minds: Tzu Chi emphasizes putting the Buddha’s teachings into action,” *Tzu Chi: Buddhism in Action*, Vol 11, no. 1, Spring 2004 (<http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/2004sp/qp8.htm>).

<sup>18</sup>Yu-ing Ching, *Op. Cit.*: 26.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*: 30.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*: 86.

differentiate good from evil. And it can be seen in his aptitude to separate right from wrong.”<sup>21</sup> “To see oneself lightly is to have wisdom, and to regard oneself as all important is otherwise.”<sup>22</sup> “A happy person creates a happy home, and from that is able to contribute to his country and finally the world.”<sup>23</sup> “Our attitudes decide whether our lives can be happy and whether the world can be peaceful. Only when we stop arguing and instead try to get along well with others is it possible for us to have happiness and peace of mind. We should rejoice over the success of others and praise them for their achievements, and not let our minds be filled with aggravation and jealousy.”<sup>24</sup> She believes that people should love the world in the same way as they love themselves and their families. Her hope is that the rich and the poor can all enjoy great spiritual rewards. “The material possessions of this world are only valuable when needed. Let us say that I have a diamond ring or any other gems. If I were hungry with no food to eat or clothes to wear, what do you think I would choose - a bowl of rice or the diamond and gems?” “Therefore, there is nothing more valuable than kindness and love. Tzu Chi must provide material aid, but even more importantly, we must educate people spiritually. Education should not be limited to schools. We should reach deep within the communities we live in and provide education for the heart... our goal is to enlighten the rich and assist the poor. When we are blessed with wealth, ability, and wisdom, we must contribute to the well being of those less fortunate.” Tzu Chi has accomplished the most in the area of character training through her educational institutions, workshops, camps, and regular programs on the TV. She believes that such a character building is beyond the reach of the average education system. In the Tzu Chi world, there are only ordinary people cultivating and realizing their buddha-nature to relieve all beings from suffering. Her Yi Teh Mother/Sister Association, a volunteer group formed of Tzu Chi commissioners take care of the students in the university.

#### 4. CULTURE

Tzu Chi aims to deeply implant in people’s hearts the idea of “recognizing, cherishing, and cultivating good fortune.” The members interact with people within their community. They encourage each other and share experiences. The central point of the activities of Tzu Chi is to create living bodhisattvas in this very world. In her opinion, Tzu Chi members by sharing each other’s experience become living sūtras. Establishments such as Still Thoughts Hall are symbols of the Tzu Chi spirit of contentment, gratitude, understanding, and accommodation. An effort is made to show through its Tzu Chi TV as to how its missions are carried out and how “great mercy is shown even to strangers and great compassion for all.” All the men and women at Tzu Chi wear the same dark blue coloured uniforms, in a colour of humbleness and patience. “A person should not live in yesterday, nor should he live in tomorrow. The only reality is today and this current moment. Give it your full attention, and the past will disappear, and the future will arrive in due time to become the present.”<sup>25</sup>

#### 5. BONE-MARROW DONATION

In 1995, Tzu Chi established an organ transplant team.

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<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*: 123.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*: 97.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*: 18.

<sup>24</sup>“The White Elephant,” *Tzu Chi: Buddhism in Action*, Vol 11, no. 3, Fall 2004 (<http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/2004fa/qf15.htm>).

<sup>25</sup>Yu-ing Ching, *Op. Cit.*: 127.

“In my speeches to the public, I mentioned organ donation, which was not popular. Many said I was going against religious tenets. However, when there is sorrow, the world is also full of the warmth of rebirth. Is it not important that the family and the deceased join together to help those in need through organ donation?”<sup>26</sup>

In October 1993, Tzu Chi established the first bone marrow donor registry in Taiwan to help patients with blood diseases. As the end of 2004, the registry had collected data from more than 200,000 volunteer donors, making it the world's largest Chinese bone marrow data bank. Through its efforts, there have been 167 successful transplants, 77 of which were for foreign recipients. Since the first bone marrow donation to a foreign recipient in Singapore on September 26, 1994, the registry has sent bone marrow from Taiwan donors to patients in the over a dozen different countries.

## 6. INTERNATIONAL RELIEF

Emergency assistance to typhoon-stricken Bangladesh in 1991 marked the beginning of the foundation's international relief efforts. Since then, the Tzu Chi Foundation has been organizing disaster relief work at the international level in times of earthquake, war, epidemics, floods, and droughts. Today, Tzu Chi has branches and liaison offices in 28 countries around the globe. Tzu Chi's disaster relief work is carried out in the spirit of humanitarianism, based on respect for life and belief in the innate goodness of humanity. Transcending political, ethnical, religious and geographical boundaries, volunteers strive to help victims wherever disasters strike. In addition to material assistance, the foundation has also encouraged mutual help among victims and helped local people to become independent by involving them in rebuilding their own communities. Master Cheng Yen believes that the ultimate goal is to inspire disaster victims to contribute to others in turn when they have the ability to do so, thus creating “a global village of Great Love.”<sup>27</sup> Tzu Chi's international relief work is based upon the following five principles:<sup>28</sup>

- 1. Directness:** The Tzu Chi fact-finding team and volunteers travel to the disaster area to study the situation before they arrange for relief supplies according to the needs of the victims. The team draws up name lists of the households who truly need help. Volunteers then personally distribute relief supplies to the hands of the victims, at the same time giving them their care and blessings.
- 2. Priority:** When the disaster areas are too widespread, Tzu Chi centers relief work on the most affected area or where outside aid is most scarce. In this way, limited resources are put to the most effective use where help is most needed.
- 3. Respect:** Wherever Tzu Chi relief workers go to help, they must respect the local customs, lifestyle, religion and cultural traditions. They should help the victims as friends and avoid being condescending. The quality of the relief supplies such as clothing, food, medicine or shelters should be of good quality, as if they were for the volunteers' own use. Finally, the relief supplies should be handed to the victims with both hands and with gratitude toward them for letting the volunteers help.

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<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.* : 83.

<sup>27</sup><http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/book/book2/3.htm>.

<sup>28</sup><http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/book/book2/4.htm>.

- 4. Timeliness:** Whenever a disaster arises, quick actions are taken to study the actual situation and collect the necessary information. After evaluation and preparation, relief supplies are distributed to the victims in the shortest time possible.
- 5. Practicality:** Tzu Chi relief workers always study the situation of the disaster area beforehand, so that they can provide the help most needed. The relief actions should be practicable, prompt and effective, if not multipurpose. No relief effort should be wasted.

With Tzu Chi's internationalization, overseas branches of TIMA have been established in nine countries. In recent years, in support of Tzu Chi's international relief efforts, TIMA members have also held free clinics at numerous disaster areas. This has broadened the scope of Tzu Chi's international medical aid to help more people. In addition to international emergency medical aid, TIMA implements long-term programs to recruit local medical and non-medical volunteers. The objective is to set up medical stations in areas with insufficient medical resources to provide long-term assistance.

## 7. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Tzu Chi volunteers from all walks of life and different age groups are constantly doing resource recycling at the grassroots level in order to protect the environment. Besides, recycling resources, many Tzu Chi members have also disciplined their consumption of plastic bags, paper cups and dishes used in markets and food booths. They carry with them their own reusable lunch boxes, cups, chopsticks, shopping bags, etc. to decrease the amount of garbage. Master Cheng Yen advocates that as both living creatures and material things have their life span, dumping things when they are still usable is equivalent to ending their life span prematurely. "Turn garbage into gold"<sup>29</sup> is a slogan that she uses for doing recycling. But she says that promoting recycling is only one way to conserve natural resources. We also need to encourage each family to cherish things. If we can consume less, appreciate what we have, and discard things slowly, then the money we save can be used to help many more hungry and needy people throughout the world. As recent abnormal changes in global climate have revealed that Mother Nature is seriously ill as a result of excessive exploitation and reckless destruction by human beings, Master Cheng Yen feels that

"For us to be healthy, our planet needs to be healthy first. To accomplish this task we must lead by example. Several years ago we started promoting the use of reusable utensils- bowl, chopsticks, and cup; we bring them everywhere with us. If everyone brings his own utensils, this would greatly benefit the environment. Therefore, if we are able to bring our own chopsticks, fewer bamboo trees will be chopped down. In addition, it also ensures our health. Therefore, we should not only bring the chopsticks ourselves but also encourage other people to do so as well. Indeed, everyone should take action to protect the environment. Otherwise, no matter how much resources mother earth provides us, we will still use them up one day... if we do not take care of the environment, the natural cycle will be disrupted. We must be mindful and work hard to advocate such an environmental consciousness. Do not be wasteful. This is the way to truly protect the planet and receive the benefits. For us to be healthy, our planet

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<sup>29</sup>"Our Spiritual Cultivation Ground: The Community," *Tzu Chi: Buddhism in Action*, Vol 11, no. 3, Fall 2004 (<http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/2004fa/qf7.htm>).



needs to be healthy first.”<sup>30</sup>

Following ancient wisdom, the nuns make the best use of everything. ‘Full Utilization of Resources’ is a motto for environmental protection at the Jing Si Abode. For example, they use grapefruit peel as fertilizer and mosquito repellant. They also use natural detergents such as soybean powder for dishwashing to avoid harmful residues from chemical detergents. The powder sediments are used as fertilizer and the water used to water the crops. Every part is used and nothing is wasted. “To treasure the life of objects is protecting life and cherishing blessings,” is the basis of her principles of environmental protection. For instance, she uses each piece of paper four times. She will use other people’s used paper, then write on the backside once with pencil, once with pen, and finally with Chinese brush. The nuns’ clothes are all made from recycled cloth. To reduce the use of strong chemical products, they hand wash their clothes using soap and dry them in the sunshine. This not only saves energy, but also sterilizes the clothes. The monastic residents at the Jing Si Abode have continued to pursue her principles of environmental protection through mindful fourfold garbage sorting:

1. **Decomposable:** fruit rinds, leafage, food remnants, vegetable tops, etc.
2. **Non-decomposable and burnable:** toilet paper, cloth remnants, timber, etc.
3. **Non-recyclable:** Styrofoam, plastic bags, nylon ropes, etc.
4. **Recyclable:** plastic bottles, yogurt drink bottles, aluminum and iron cans, glass, etc.

To save trees, the office uses both sides of recycled papers and uses the margins or blank parts of computer forms and receipts as note papers. To reduce the use of fax papers, the office only faxes the section with the message. Reusable stationary items such as paper clips are often used instead of staples. New envelopes are used only for mailing letters. Otherwise, envelopes are reused until they are seriously torn. Empty bottles are used as decoration. The office exemplifies the concept of beautifying life simply and naturally. There is mutual understanding among the Abode’s residents about reusing paper resources. Master Sheng Yen calls upon the public to plant more trees, protect plants, recycle resources and reduce garbage as much as possible. She reminds everyone to be always mindful of Mother Earth, to cherish good fortune and all living creatures, and to purify both the environment and the minds. “It is necessary that I and my ordained and novice nuns earn their daily morsel with a full day’s work.”<sup>31</sup> After the meal, a small kettle of hot water is placed on each table. Everyone pours a small amount of water in his/her bowl, slosh around with chop sticks, then pour the water into the dish where is again sloshed around and poured back into the original bowl. Then it is drunk. “We don’t believe in wasting anything, not even the oil that is left in the bowls and dishes,”<sup>32</sup> says Master Cheng Yen. “All lives deserve to be respected, and all beings need to be loved. It ought to be easy for us to feel the pain experienced by the bodies other than our own and grant happiness to those who are but strangers... We should protect the earth by adopting and practicing the vegetarian lifestyle. A vegetarian diet is sanitary and also good to the environment. It is a way of nurturing our love and

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<sup>30</sup> “The Four Immeasurable Minds: Tzu Chi emphasizes putting the Buddha’s teachings into action,” *Tzu Chi: Buddhism in Action*, Vol 11, no. 1, Spring 2004 (<http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/2004sp/qp8.htm>).

<sup>31</sup> Yu-ing Ching, *Op. Cit.*, 49.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*: 49.

compassion for the earth as well as a way to protect our health.”<sup>33</sup>

## 8. COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERING

She exhorts her followers that they should take the initiative to promote or help in a good cause, instead of passively waiting to be asked to do so. They are expected to guide people to do good deeds by setting good personal examples first. This will inspire others to follow suit. She feels that the community where we reside is our best spiritual cultivation ground where we can motivate our neighbors to take action and offer help to the needy. Everyone has innate buddha-nature, it can be activated “when relentless ones bring out their loving-kindness, belligerent ones bring out their compassion, jealous ones rejoice in other’s success, and ones who have attachments are willing to let go. In essence, the bodhi-mind encompasses the *Four Immeasurable Minds* of loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and giving.”<sup>34</sup>

**1. Great Loving-kindness** means to give joy to all beings. The Tzu Chi missions of charity, medicine, education, and culture all aim at bringing people happiness. By participating in these missions, the givers realize how blessed they are and the recipients feel joyful.

**2. Great Compassion** means to eradicate suffering. When others suffer, we feel their sorrow; and when they get hurt, we feel their pain. Knowing that all beings are one interdependent entity, we naturally feel the misery of others as our own. Because we cannot bear to see other people suffer, we rush to their aid the moment we learn of their misery. We should be kind to animals as well and refrain from slaughtering them and eating their flesh due to our respect for all life.

**3. Great Joy** means that as we strive to purify people’s minds, we must also try to get rid of our mental afflictions such as jealousy. Jealousy is the subtlest form of affliction. We must learn to rejoice over others’ accomplishments and feel as happy when we hear other people being praised as if we were being praised ourselves.

**4. Great Giving** means that we must be willing to give unselfishly. After making a contribution, we must remain humble and be willing to accept all results without thinking of what great things we have done and how much praise we deserve to gain.

For her, Buddhism had to be actively involved in helping people. After leaving home against the wishes of her widowed mother, she shaved her own head (a very untraditional act) to become a novice nun and spent some time experimenting in different temples. But soon she realized that she did not belong to any of the temples that she had seen, nor the temples that she might see in the future, because she disagreed with every master she had met. She saw too many practices being followed in Buddhist temples which she felt were unacceptable. For instance, to Chin-yun, burning paper money for the dead was ridiculous, and asking the Buddha to perform miracles was irrational. “While praying, a person should pray to no one but himself.”<sup>35</sup> “And so when people ask me about praying, I always tell them to pray to their own hearts when their true self stays. because in a person’s heart, his true nature is the nature of the Buddha... A true prayer is not said in a voice which is meant to be heard by anyone outside of oneself. It is said in a voice which is meant for one’s own heart. Once a person’s

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<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*: 3.

<sup>34</sup>“The Four Immeasurable Minds: Tzu Chi emphasizes putting the Buddha’s teachings into action,” *Tzu Chi: Buddhism in Action*, Vol 11, no. 1, Spring 2004 (<http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/2004sp/qp8.htm>).

<sup>35</sup>Yu-ing Ching, *Op. Cit.*: 113.

heart hears his prayer, so will the rest of the world.”<sup>36</sup> “A person’s power is as strong as his wish. Therefore a man should be self-reliant instead of depending on anyone... not even the Buddha.”<sup>37</sup> According to her, being a Buddhist does not give one the right to pray to the Buddha and expect him to perform miracles for one. The Buddha was a man. But since his wisdom, courage, and perseverance were superior to those of all men, he was also a saint. Only a greedy and foolish man will think of the Buddha as a wish-granting God, and then offer the Buddha a promise, or the light of a few candles, or the fragrance of some incense, therefore expecting the Buddha to give him whatever he wants in return. Even in her very early days, she denied the existence of supernatural power, divine revelations, messengers, or prophets.<sup>38</sup> “Showing respect to the Buddha is not just about going to a temple to worship his statue. What is more important is to put what we have learned from his teachings into practice in our daily conduct.”<sup>39</sup> “The Buddhists are not god-worshippers, but people determined to enlighten themselves and become wide awake.”<sup>40</sup> “Some people believe that the only way to calm the mind down is by disengaging oneself from worldly affairs and chanting the name of the Buddha. This is true. By doing so, the mind might become quiet. But eventually deluded thoughts run rampant and ruffle the mind again. If we can actively benefit others with all kinds of good deeds, then not only will we be able to establish good relationships with them, we will also be able to purify our minds. This is an effective way to benefit others and ourselves at the same time.”<sup>41</sup> Master Cheng Yen, who still calls herself a mere nun, has always led a simple and virtuous life; in her frugality, she made candles and bean powder to maintain a living. In response to remarks that she has created a new sect of Buddhism, she points out that this is not true. She says, “I am bringing Buddhism back to its original form, which is simple and down-to-earth.”<sup>42</sup> According to her, “Showing respect to the Buddha is not just about going to a temple to worship his statue. What is more important is to put what we have learned from his teachings into practice in our daily conduct.”<sup>43</sup>

She believes that “having a good heart without doing good things is still equal to doing nothing at all.”<sup>44</sup> The central philosophy of her life is “to humanize Buddhism and bring bodhisattvas into this world.”<sup>45</sup> Her active efforts to humanize Buddhism are based on her *three vows*: purity of mind, harmonization of society, and freeing the world from disaster. “To study Buddhism under me is to adopt a new way of life.”<sup>46</sup> When she says work, she does not mean going out to beg for offerings or performing religious services for money. They have always supported themselves by working with their

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<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*: 117.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*: 23.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*: 24.

<sup>39</sup>“Our Spiritual Cultivation Ground: The Community,” *Tzu Chi: Buddhism in Action*, Vol 11, no. 3, Fall 2004 (<http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/2004fa/qf7.htm>).

<sup>40</sup>Yu-ing Ching, *Op. Cit.*: 39.

<sup>41</sup>“The Four Immeasurable Minds: Tzu Chi emphasizes putting the Buddha’s teachings into action,” *Tzu Chi: Buddhism in Action*, Vol 11, no. 1, Spring 2004 (<http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/2004sp/qp8.htm>).

<sup>42</sup>Yu-ing Ching, *Op. Cit.*: 146.

<sup>43</sup>“The Four Immeasurable Minds: Tzu Chi emphasizes putting the Buddha’s teachings into action,” *Tzu Chi: Buddhism in Action*, Vol 11, no. 1, Spring 2004 (<http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/2004sp/qp8.htm>).

<sup>44</sup>Quoted at Jennifer Juang “Truly in Action,” *Tzu Chi: Buddhism in Action*, Vol 10, no. 3, Fall 2003 (<http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/2003fa/qf8.htm>).

<sup>45</sup>Liu King-pong “Happy Birthday, Master Yin Shun,” *Tzu Chi: Buddhism in Action*, Vol 10, no. 2, Summer 2003 (<http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/2003su/qs1.htm>).

<sup>46</sup>Yu-ing Ching, *Op. Cit.*: 20.

own hands— growing peanuts and vegetables, making chicken-feed bags out of cement sacks, knitting sweaters and making baby shoes. They always do all kinds of work to feed ourselves. One of her admirers remarks about the audience hall at her headquarters: “I was amazed by the simple elegance of this room. There were no gaudy colors nor flashy ornaments, no incense to fill the place with smoke nor the burning of paper money to create an unpleasant odor.”<sup>47</sup> Master Cheng Yen says: “We are all human beings, the best of us a saint, but never a god. We all can follow a saint’s conduct and imitate his behavior, but it is unnecessary to worship him.”<sup>48</sup> Those women who are over 18 and want to become nuns have to spend two extra years as ‘chon-ju’ (permanent members of the temple) than the novice nuns. This means that while a novice nun is almost guaranteed to become a nun in the future, the fate of a chon-ju is unknown. The reason is that when a woman already lived too many years of her life outside the temple, whether she can become adjusted to the life of a nun is questionable.

According to her, “if we truly wish to gain insight into a teaching, we have to exercise wisdom to strive to deeply appreciate its principles. When you ask for nothing in return, the genuine and sincere goodwill that comes from your hearts and the special connection with the project is a truly wonderful feeling. If we just talk or listen to the Dharma, we cannot fully understand the experience. Without a concrete experience, we have the possibility of completely forgetting the experience. Therefore, to walk on the Bodhisattva Path, we must put theory into practice.” “When does one attain Buddhahood? The answer is when we ourselves awaken to the true principles of the Dharma. When we have understanding of the principles and can put them into action. When we can influence and teach others the truth that has awakened in us.” Talking about the real experience of Tzu Chi members, she points out “Watching the physically handicapped struggling to gain the full use of their arms and legs they realized how fortunate they were to have the full use of their bodies. Observing the mentally handicapped battling to utter a few words or gather some thoughts, they began to see that the right to use their minds to the fullest potential was a privilege. It dawned on them that for the physically and mentally handicapped all the precious gems in the world are useless, nor is there any use for fame or wealth.”<sup>49</sup> Visits to the Geriatrics and Pediatrics wards show a complete contrast. In the latter, each child is surrounded by parents and other worried adults looking after them, whereas the former almost always wore a completely deserted look. “Seeing the selfless love of a mother and a father, the Tzu-chi members began to regret that they had not been treating their parents well enough. They had all argued with their parents and at times had been rude enough to break their parents’ hearts.”<sup>50</sup>

He correctly points out that “A spiritual cultivator will not discriminate because of religion. No matter what religion we observe, we must be united in our concern for others.” “Love is formless and not material. It is without bounds or limits.” One of her workers at the School of Nursing remarked: “Neither the Master nor her followers ever told us that we should become committed to Buddhism. And the strange thing is, since there is no one to push us, most of us are studying the books on Buddhism willingly.”<sup>51</sup> It was “indeed a manifestation of Great Love that transcended borders and religions.” Said a volunteer working with an American charity organization called Knightsbridge International .<sup>52</sup> “Spiritual practice guides us to discover the purpose of life and makes very clear to us about our direction in life; we will not be lost or confused. Therefore, religion leads us to understand

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<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*: 5.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*: 7.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*: 121.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*: 122.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*: 92.

<sup>52</sup><http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/book/book2/5c.htm>.

life's purpose and also teaches us about proper conduct. If we live a disciplined, responsible life and uphold our duties to the best of our ability, that is the best way to live. We need not create stress for ourselves in order to go about the affairs of our lives. Stress does not come from others. Instead, it all emanates from within. We are the ones who create stress for ourselves. Therefore, do not make your life too complicated. Do not dwell on thoughts and repeat them over and over. This is how stress is created from within. We become erratic and suspicious of the motives of other people. It is best to keep our lives simple." "There is a great difference between what we need and what we want. There are the needs that are essential and fundamental; they can and should be obtained with hard work. Desires beyond what we need are our wants; they are endless, ought to be modified and lessened."<sup>53</sup> Thus, "A person has to know how to use the money earned by him. If he doesn't know how to use money, his money will use him."<sup>54</sup>

Master Cheng Yen has reinterpreted some very important aspects of Buddhism. According to her, a monk or a nun is not a parasite as some people try to give the impression. Even today, with ill-health and advancing age, she earns her own livelihood. The encounter with three Catholic nuns 1966, who had pointed out to her that Buddhism was rather asocial, Master Cheng Yen was motivated to 'humanize Buddhism.' Thereafter she decided to practise a 'just do it' philosophy. She told her disciples not to simply study sūtras or hold significant ceremonies. They could not get personal blessings just by worshipping the Buddha day and night. The real meaning of Buddhism, she pointed out was to relieve people's suffering in body and mind. This could not be done just by studying sūtras. Moreover, she points out, life is too short. Thus, the earlier the people started to do good deeds, the sooner people would be redeemed from their misery. "We are fish in a tank with holes; time is the water that keeps seeping out, and once it is gone all our physical forms must die."<sup>55</sup> "Life is a journey; we board an express train at birth and head for the unavoidable destination of death. The scenery drifts by, and the only meaningful thing we can do is to be good and kind to our fellow passengers."<sup>56</sup> Her success story is above all a success-story for womankind. In today's world, which is still run by men, she has set a quintessential example for other women to follow. Her life is a giant step towards women's struggle to be treated at par with men. According to her, "A woman's world is not within the boundary of her home. Equal to men, women are also entitled to serve society, the nation, and all mankind."<sup>57</sup> The philosophy of Master Cheng Yen is an ideal mixture of the simple and plain aspects of both Hīnayāna and Mayāyāna Buddhism.

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<sup>53</sup>Yu-ing Ching, *Op. Cit.*,: 55.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*: 137.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*: 142.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*: 13.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*: 172.