

## SHIH CHENG YEN

*"The sutras are the Way, and the Way is to be walked upon."*

Shih CHENG YEN

For Buddhists, "everyday is the beginning of becoming a new person," teaches Shih (Master) CHENG YEN. The past is irrelevant. Moreover, dwelling on the past brings "pain, hate, anger." CHENG YEN applies this wisdom to her own life and rarely discusses her childhood; indeed she says she has forgotten all about it. As a result, the early period of her life is shrouded in mist. But what does emerge from the few short sketches published about her and the reminiscences of her companions is a tale befitting the Buddhist sage and modern miracle worker that she has become.

She was born on 14 May 1937 in the town of Ch'ingshui, Taichung County, Taiwan, to a not-so-well-to-do couple who already had ten children. For this reason, little CHIN-YUN, as she was named, was given over at birth to be raised by an uncle, Wang Tien-sun, and his spouse, whom she would consider father and mother. The family lived in Fengyuan where Wang prospered as an owner and manager of movie theaters. Wartime turbulence marked the years of CHIN-YUN's youth and she completed only six years of formal schooling. Afterwards, she stayed at home and helped out in her father's business.

When she was fifteen years old a crisis gripped the household. Her mother fell desperately ill. Doctors told the family that only a risky operation could save her. CHIN-YUN beseeched the Chinese goddess of mercy, Bodhisattva Kuan-yin, to cure her mother. In prayer, she promised she would willingly forfeit twelve years of her own life in return for her mother's recovery. Kuan-yin, it is said, appeared to her in a dream and for three nights in a row gave CHIN-YUN a packet of medicine which, in the dream, she then administered to her mother. In real life, it was soon clear that CHIN-YUN's mother was recovering and without an operation. After this experience, the young girl committed herself to a spiritual life and also became a vegetarian. However, she was not free to take up the life of a nun; in her early twenties she left home to enter a convent but her mother pursued her and brought her home.

CHIN-YUN had five younger siblings. As the eldest, she was called upon to meet important responsibilities in the household in addition to assisting her father. One day, as he was making the rounds of his theaters with CHIN-YUN at his side, Wang was struck down by a stroke. Although only fifty-one, he died the following day. As she mourned him and brooded over this shocking demonstration of the futility of human life, CHIN-YUN consulted the nuns at a local temple. What sort of woman is happiest, she asked one of them. The nun replied, the happiest woman is one "who can carry a grocery basket." CHIN-YUN said, "What do you mean? I carry a grocery basket every day, yet I am so unhappy." The nun told her simply to come back when she finally understood. CHIN-YUN soon realized that, for her, carrying a grocery basket meant taking charge of her own fate. She resolved, at last, to break away.

On the spur of the moment, she joined a small group of *bhikshunis* (nuns) and other like-minded young women on an aimless journey. A train—the first that happened to come along on the day of their decision—bore them south. They disembarked in a desolate, mountainous region in the southwest of the island and happened upon a small abandoned temple. This they briefly made their abode and took up the ascetic life of spiritual truth seekers. They taught themselves Buddhist sutras and, although penniless, refused offerings from nearby villagers. Instead, they survived on leftover peanuts and yams scavenged from farmers' fields and on wild plants they found in the nearby forests. CHIN-YUN shaved her head to signify her break with the past and her commitment to a new life of spiritual devotion.

She was happy. But she was not yet a proper nun. This required being initiated by a teacher-monk and, eventually, being ordained by a senior monk or nun. CHIN-YUN and her companions began moving about, searching for a temple, convent, or monastery that would take them in. None would. Monks were reluctant to initiate young people who lacked the consent of their parents. Eventually they found themselves in Hualien, a rough and undeveloped seaside town on Taiwan's east coast. Although no temple would accept them there either, the women nevertheless decided to settle down. Near a local shrine, they built a small hut to live in and supported themselves doing odd jobs. Together they meditated and studied Buddhist texts.

A famous story about CHIN-YUN and her fellow devotees derives from this time. Seeing flames rising above their small hut one night, a team of Hualien firemen rushed to the site. Upon arriving, however, they saw no fire, only six young women passionately chanting the sutras! Although CHIN-YUN and her companions sought no fame or publicity, stories such as this brought them a certain notoriety; they

carried on quietly nonetheless. CHIN-YUN studied the Buddhist canon and continued to seek a senior monk who would ordain her.

In 1963, at age twenty-six, CHIN-YUN found Yin Shun, a venerable senior monk and revered abbot who accepted her for instruction in Taipei. Upon her ordination, he gave her a new name, CHENG YEN, to signify her commitment to a life removed from worldly ties and charged her to remember always: "What we do for the Buddha, we do for all living things."

Now ordained and wearing the robes of a qualified nun, CHENG YEN rejoined her companions in Hualien. Living in a straw hut, they continued to pursue an austere life of study and religious devotion. CHENG YEN's stature as a teacher grew and, at a certain point, she was acknowledged as the leader and was called Shih, or Master. Neither then nor later did she or her followers accept alms for themselves or perform religious rites in return for fees or donations. From time to time in the early years they had to borrow rice to feed themselves, but CHENG YEN cautioned against this. Instead, she encouraged her companions to earn money by knitting sweaters and making chicken-feed bags. The nuns also learned to grow rice, sweet potatoes, and peanuts. Shih CHENG YEN named her small community of religious women the Pure Abode of Still Thoughts.

This spartan monastic life yielded serenity of a kind, but CHENG YEN was not content simply to withdraw from the world. Hualien in the early 1960s was a rough frontier town in which many struggled to get by; for the poor and the weak, life could be cruel. This fact was brought home to CHENG YEN one day when she visited a sick friend at one of the town's primitive private hospitals. A pool of blood covered the floor of the hospital doorway. She asked what had happened and learned in horror that a woman in the throes of a miscarriage and bleeding profusely had been detained there, then denied treatment because she could not pay an advance deposit. The woman, a member of a tribal minority, had been carried by four men for eight days from the island's hinterland to reach the hospital. This heartless disregard for humanity jarred the young nun. Mindful of the Buddha's teachings to save life and to show compassion toward the unfortunate, she decided to do something.

CHENG YEN's first efforts were small, since she and her disciples were themselves poor. By this time, however, several women from the town had begun visiting the nuns to participate in their religious devotions and to seek counsel. CHENG YEN struck upon the idea of tapping their generosity. She distributed a crude bamboo jar, or "piggy

bank,” to thirty housewives and asked the women to deposit a small sum as they went about their marketing every day. This way, CHENG YEN told them, they would experience the goodness of giving daily and a fund would be accumulated to assist the truly needy. CHENG YEN and her disciples sold homemade baby shoes to add to the fund. One of the first beneficiaries of this scheme was a woman in her eighties who had arrived from mainland China in search of her husband. He, alas, had died long before and the woman found herself penniless in Hualien, where the nuns of Pure Abode came to her rescue. Soon they were able to assist others: elderly persons living alone; homeless men and women; victims of crime, accidents, and other misfortunes; and people too poor to pay for medical treatment.

The nuns quickly gained a reputation for their good works, especially as word got around that every penny they collected was scrupulously directed to charity. As the number of contributors increased well beyond the original thirty housewives, the relief work expanded proportionally. In 1966, CHENG YEN decided to create a formal charitable organization to manage these efforts. She named it the Tz'u Chi (Compassion and Mercy) Buddhist Contribution Society. CHENG YEN appointed her original thirty housewives as commissioners of the new Society and challenged them to seek out the needy and devote themselves actively to helping them. Love for one another, she told them, could actually transform the heartless world into a “pure land,” or paradise.

By word of mouth, news of the Tz'u Chi Society's endeavors spread. Contributions rose and, over the next decade, the Society's membership grew beyond Hualien to all of Taiwan. CHENG YEN maintained the Society's reputation for integrity by publishing a monthly accounting of contributions and expenditures and by carefully evaluating the needs of potential recipients. After all, as she told her disciples and commissioners, “some of our donors are hard-up themselves; we must use our money wisely and make sure we help people truly in need.”

Organizationally, CHENG YEN kept the Tz'u Chi Society and the Pure Abode community separate. In the early years, she and the other nuns coordinated many charitable activities personally, taking in contributions and distributing alms. But as the Society grew, much of this work was taken over by lay volunteers and, eventually, by paid professionals who took up the increasingly complex work of managing larger and larger sums of money and of coordinating the activities of first hundreds, then thousands, and eventually over a million members. This permitted residents of the Pure Abode to carry on their religious devotions under Shih CHENG YEN's daily guidance, while the Master herself headed both the small religious congregation and the ever larger

Tz'u Chi Society. Even so, the Pure Abode remained the Society's spiritual center and, as CHENG YEN's headquarters, its physical center as well.

Although the needs of the religious community remained minimal—even as its number grew to over twenty—the group was eventually able to improve upon its rudimentary living conditions. This was the result of a gift from CHENG YEN's mother who, in 1969, donated land for a temple complex. The temple that was built was small, white, and beautiful in the Chinese style. A teaching hall, dormitory, kitchen, and meeting rooms were added one by one, financed by loans from a farmers' cooperative bank and paid back conscientiously from the proceeds of the nuns' many enterprises. Over the years these included everything from sewing cotton gloves, leather vests, tee-shirts, and diapers to manufacturing electric gadgets, toys, plastic flowers, and pottery, as well as making candles and soybean powder. In this way the Pure Abode grew while remaining completely self-supporting.

*Of the eight sufferings, the suffering of illness is the greatest.  
Of the eight blessings, the foremost is to cure illness.*

Shih CHENG YEN

By the late 1970s, CHENG YEN was all too familiar with the varieties of human suffering: the loneliness of old age; the appalling surprise and catastrophic cost of natural disasters, fires, and traffic accidents; the plight of orphans; and the indignities of widowhood and of poverty in general. By this time, Tz'u Chi members were involved actively in providing relief in all these areas. One need that nearly everyone shared, CHENG YEN observed, was for accessible health care. In Hualien, providing financial assistance to needy patients solved only part of the problem. Many medical problems could not be adequately treated in the port city at any price because the special facilities and doctors were simply not there. For critical cases, Hualien's people had no recourse other than to be flown to Taipei or Taichung—both on the island's west side. For most people this was prohibitively expensive, and even for those who could afford it the time delay often proved fatal. What Hualien needed was a state-of-the-art hospital of its own—one from which no one would be turned away.

Beginning in 1979, at the age of forty-two and suffering from a life-threatening heart condition herself, CHENG YEN launched a campaign to build just such a hospital. To help her plan the new institution, she approached Dr. Ts'eng Wen-p'ing, a heart specialist who was then deputy director of Taiwan University Hospital in Taipei. He tried to dissuade her, pointing out not only the extraordinary cost of such a project, but also its complexity. CHENG YEN persisted, however, and

after a few meetings Ts'eng agreed to help. In the years immediately thereafter, he and colleagues at Taiwan University Hospital spearheaded the technical planning as CHENG YEN and her commissioners set about raising the money. The latter, of course, was a gigantic task. Something on the order of U.S.\$22 million was needed. CHENG YEN cast her net widely and, through the Tz'u Chi Buddhist Contribution Society's many thousands of members, passed the begging bowl throughout Taiwan. This campaign captured the public's imagination and by 1984 it had raised enough money to purchase a plot of land. Even though the Society still lacked funds to complete its hospital, CHENG YEN pushed ahead with a ground-breaking ceremony.

Governor Lee T'eng-hui of Taiwan, the ceremony's presiding official, had become acquainted with the Tz'u Chi Society—and with its founder's optimism and faith—only a year or two before. Dining one evening at the Pure Abode, he had witnessed Tz'u Chi volunteers packing food and clothing to be distributed to poor families throughout the province in anticipation of a bitter winter. He acknowledged that his government's social welfare department was doing less to help the needy. Then and there, although himself a Christian, he became a member of the Tz'u Chi Society and personally donated some U.S.\$800 to the hospital fund.

As Dr. Ts'eng had predicted, building the hospital was fraught with difficulties. Just before construction was to begin, Taiwan's military authorities suddenly laid claim to the building lot for "security reasons." Complicated negotiations ensued, ending only when President Chiang Ching-kuo intervened to break the impasse by offering the Society an alternative lot—one more accessible, as it turned out, near the train station. At one point, a donor from Japan offered the Society a sum nearly large enough to pay for the entire project. To her elated followers, however, Shih CHENG YEN said, "We cannot accept it." Her explanation goes to the heart of Tz'u Chi's enormous success: "In building a hospital . . . the real value is that everyone vows to help in some way and, little by little, each and every contribution adds up to a large amount. What is even more valuable is that, at the same time, it brings out the sincere compassion of those hundreds and thousands of people." If a truly huge sum such as this one, she continued, "comes to us from the sky, how can we experience and understand the strength that comes from the accumulation of small deeds into one powerful one?"

In April 1986, the Tz'u Chi Buddhist General Hospital opened its doors, although only 100 of its planned 250 beds were ready. For a twelve-day period, people were invited to come to the hospital to be diagnosed and treated free of charge. Thousands responded; for some

it was the first time in their lives to visit a doctor. As CHENG YEN cheered and comforted the new patients, the hospital's twenty doctors toiled night and day to care for the sick. Shortly after the opening, Dr. Ts'ai Sui-chang performed Hualien's first successful brain surgery and saved the life of a fifteen-year-old victim of a car crash. Word of this miracle spread quickly around the county and, for some, Tz'u Chi's new hospital became known simply as "the hospital that knows how to operate on people's brains."

Tz'u Chi Buddhist General Hospital requires no advance fees and provides treatment free to the poor. (Others pay according to their means.) It remains open on holidays and at night and has outpatient services for the needy outside of town. CHENG YEN imbued it with a philosophy of loving care and likened it to "a temple that heals physically as well as spiritually." Although she was eager to staff the hospital with Taiwan's best doctors, most of these preferred to establish practices in the large cities of the west coast, especially Taipei, the island's wealthy, cosmopolitan capital. By comparison, Hualien was a provincial town that lacked both the amenities of modern urban life and medical facilities equal to the talents of Taipei's finest doctors. Even so, CHENG YEN was able to persuade a few to join her staff. The country's foremost ear-nose-throat specialist, Dr. Tu Su-mien of National Taiwan University Hospital, agreed to serve as chairman of the building committee and subsequently became Tz'u Chi Hospital's founding superintendent. Ts'eng Wen-p'ing became its assistant superintendent and other specialists from National Taiwan University Hospital accepted appointments to head the departments of internal medicine, surgery, and nursing. Moreover, CHENG YEN set up an exchange program whereby doctors from the university hospital served periodically in Hualien, while Tz'u Chi's doctors served in the capital. This way, medical care at Tz'u Chi Hospital could stay abreast of modern techniques and practices. At the same time, the hospital acquired the latest medical equipment as soon as it was able and rapidly enlarged beyond its original four departments to over twenty.

The reputation of Tz'u Chi's hospital grew apace. It was quickly accredited as a teaching hospital and by 1988 it had become the choice of Taiwan Medical University students for their internships. In that year, the Society launched a massive expansion program that added hundreds of hospital beds and several facilities to the complex—including handsome residences and tennis courts for doctors and other staff members.

By 1991 Tz'u Chi Buddhist General Hospital boasted departments of pediatrics, obstetrics, gynecology, internal medicine, pathology, urology, ear-nose-throat, orthopedics, dermatology, dentistry, ophthal-

mology, anesthesiology, diagnostic radiology, pharmacology, and neurology. Its staff included two cardiovascular surgeons, two neurosurgeons, and a plastic surgeon. It operated its own blood bank and emergency room, and its department of community medicine ran outpatient clinics and sent medical teams into the remote mountains.

Tz'u Chi Hospital is managed professionally by Ts'eng Wen-p'ing, who became superintendent following the death in 1989 of Tu Su-mien. As chairperson of the board, however, Shih CHENG YEN continues to exert a powerful influence. Indeed, the hospital is pervaded with the spirit of Buddhism, which she defines as "great kindness for those with whom we have no affinities and great compassion for those of the same substance."

The hospital's entrance hall is dominated by a huge mosaic of the Buddha engaged in an act of healing. The staff gathers beneath this inspirational mural each morning and it is here that CHENG YEN occasionally greets and instructs the staff and patients. Lectures on Buddhism are also held here, as well as songfests, contests, and gala events such as concerts. Another part of the hospital houses a small meditation hall where daily worship services are held, and to which relatives of patients may go to place an offering before an image of Bodhisattva Kuan-yin to beseech her blessing.

Aside from such overt manifestations of Buddhism, the hospital is imbued with a cheerful and helping spirit. As Tz'u Chi devotee P'eng Shu-chun has written: "Hospitals have always been thought of as centers that gather the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, and death. But here at Tz'u Chi, there is actually a feeling like a spring breeze, mild and silent." This feeling is manifest in the caring demeanor of doctors and nurses, whom patients often equate with the living Buddha and the compassionate Bodhisattva. Meanwhile, at any time, day or night, Society commissioners and volunteers are busy comforting patients and doing any number of necessary chores, such as sweeping corridors and cleaning the grounds. Clad in easily identifiable vests and name tags, these ubiquitous volunteers give the hospital a touch of friendliness and warmth that is probably unique. Shih CHENG YEN herself visits the hospital several times a week to meet with doctors and administrators and also to greet patients individually. These visitations are eagerly anticipated and word of her coming spreads excitedly throughout the complex.

The Tz'u Chi Hospital was an enormous undertaking and its success and renown seem to have had a multiplier effect upon the Tz'u Chi Society, for during the years of the hospital's establishment, membership in the Society soared to well over a million and in 1990 donations



rose to U.S.\$90 million. This made it possible to establish Tz'u Chi branches all over Taiwan and in a few places abroad as well and to embark on an even more ambitious program of growth.

In 1989 the Society opened the Tz'u Chi Nursing College in Hualien. The goal of the school is to provide a livelihood for local girls (including tribal minorities) by training them to be good nurses, who exemplify the school's motto of "love, compassion, sympathy, and unselfish giving." Over one hundred students finished the two-year course and composed the first graduating class in 1991. The number of students enrolled has since grown to five hundred and an advanced five-year course has been added. Though they may be supported by their local hospitals, Tz'u Chi's nursing students pay no tuition and live in dormitories at the school's new campus on the outskirts of Hualien. They are mentored by Tz'u Chi commissioners who adopt them as "daughters." In this way, they always have an adult friend to turn to and the Tz'u Chi spirit is passed on personally.

The nursing school is but the first of several educational institutions envisioned by Shih CHENG YEN. A full-fledged medical school is being planned, which will be the core school of a university offering programs in the liberal arts, sciences, management, and religion—the first institution of its kind on the east coast. Moreover, CHENG YEN hopes similar Tz'u Chi hospitals, schools, and universities will blossom all over Taiwan. The huge contributions now pouring into the Tz'u Chi Buddhist Contribution Society make all of these plans seem feasible.

CHENG YEN has articulated four missions for the Society in the fields of charity, medicine, education, and culture. Charity was the group's original concern and has been extended to all of Taiwan. Medicine and education are being addressed in Tz'u Chi's hospital, nursing school, and planned medical schools. In the realm of culture, and especially Buddhist culture, the Society has for some years published a monthly magazine, a semi-monthly newspaper, and books, plus audio cassettes and video tapes, featuring the Society's good works and Shih CHENG YEN's teachings; it also operates a radio broadcasting unit. Soon to rise on a five-hectare lot adjacent to Tz'u Chi Hospital is the Tz'u Chi Cultural Center. The design of this mammoth structure was conceived by CHENG YEN herself. Its three pagoda-style roofs are layered one atop the other. The largest and highest, which shields nearly the entire building, represents Buddha himself, while the other two, in descending order, represent the Buddha's teachings (the Dharma) and the Buddha's disciples. The cultural center will contain several large convention halls and conference rooms, including an international conference room equipped for simultaneous translation in Chinese, Japanese, English, and French. The Tz'u Chi Society's archives will also be housed in the

Hall of Gratitude, where the achievements of the Society and its members will be recorded in detail. The center will be equipped with plenty of elevators and its corridors will be gently sloped so that physically handicapped persons can move about the building with ease.

The center will be partially funded through the "sale" to benefactors of thirty-six hundred bronze roofing tiles and fifteen thousand granite bricks, which will eventually be used to pave a grand plaza fronting the structure. By buying the bricks and tiles, says one commissioner, "many people can devote their hearts to Tz'u Chi work." At the heart of the new cultural center will be a large Sutra Preaching Hall dominated by a likeness of the "one-thousand-eye, one-thousand-hand" incarnation of Kuan-yin. The image will remind all worshippers that they will be acting as the goddess's eyes and hands as they do good deeds.

Doing good deeds is the simple message that lies behind Shih CHENG YEN's teaching. Today, some two million individuals have committed themselves to do good deeds as members of the Tz'u Chi Buddhist Contribution Society. Of them, five thousand are now commissioners. Several hundred have joined the Society's Merciful Sincerity Teams, whose members perform menial chores for those in need and commit themselves to following Buddhism's Eight Precepts (right speech, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, etc.) and to forgoing wine, adultery, and betel nut. Some of Tz'u Chi's women volunteers have pledged themselves to give up mah-jong and other trivial pursuits. Tz'u Chi's membership is drawn from all walks of life, but among its staunchest supporters today are many well-to-do and powerful people in business and government who find release from their high-pressure jobs by devoting their weekends and spare time to volunteer work. CHENG YEN, says one such member, "enables us to cultivate our field of blessings." The Master herself welcomes wealthy members, noting that one of Tz'u Chi's missions, besides saving the poor, is teaching the rich.

Throughout Taiwan, Tz'u Chi's members seek out the needy and aid them with money. They visit the elderly and the sick, and for those who die bereft of family, or without means, they conduct proper burial rites. At the general hospital, Tz'u Chi volunteers perform a legion of necessary chores while comforting patients and spurring them to recovery. Throughout Taiwan, the Society's members respond to natural disasters and other catastrophes, providing necessary medical care, relief goods, and funds to see victims through the crisis. In 1990 alone, nearly U.S.\$11 million was distributed to over ten thousand families through Tz'u Chi's Poverty Relief Fund. Thus has Shih CHENG

YEN performed the miracle of loaves and fishes in today's Taiwan—and even beyond.

A dramatic example of CHENG YEN's ability to mobilize help in the face of disaster occurred in the summer of 1991. In June that year a catastrophic flood inundated vast areas of mainland China. In the densely populated provinces of Anhui, Jiangsu, and Hunan, the crops and mud-brick homes of thousands of peasants were washed away in angry waters. Within a few weeks of learning of the disaster, six Tz'u Chi volunteers were meeting with government officials in Beijing and touring the devastated communities. CHENG YEN's team devised a plan to provide food, blankets, warm clothing, and new homes for the victims before the winter cold set in. The Chinese government provided CHENG YEN with a list of the needy and agreed to her terms: the new homes would be deeded to individuals, not to any organ of the state, and they would be large, three-bedroom dwellings of the kind common in Taiwan, not the one-room structures the government of the People's Republic proposed. Furthermore, politics would play no part in the distribution of aid. To pay for this ambitious act of private charity, CHENG YEN and the Society launched a massive drive for funds in Taiwan and abroad. In four months, donors had contributed U.S.\$16 million. The Society's volunteers were able to distribute relief goods to tens of thousands of flood victims and, in October 1991, to launch the construction of more than three thousand new homes.

The Pure Abode temple complex, where Shih CHENG YEN continues to dwell with her nuns, remains the spiritual center of her empire of love and charity. Here several dozen Tz'u Chi employees work long hours on the Society's computers, recording every contribution and carefully issuing receipts for each one. Here, in the front hall, CHENG YEN preaches and leads her followers in the study of the sutras. And here, in the courtyard, gather the local needy to receive free medical treatment during the temple's monthly "open house."

At the Pure Abode, CHENG YEN's enormously complex and busy life is embedded within the simpler rhythms of a Buddhist convent. Rising at 3:45 A.M., the nuns worship and attend a morning class together. Then at 5:20 the Master meets with them for meditation and speaks to them briefly. At 6:00 the group eats breakfast and then cleans the compound. Just after 7:00 there is a meeting between CHENG YEN and Tz'u Chi commissioners and volunteers to discuss the Society's ongoing charitable endeavors and the day's work. From 8:00 until noon, and in the afternoons following lunch and a rest period, the nuns go about their daily chores. At Pure Abode, from its early days until now, the rule remains: "no work, no food." A few of the nuns assist

CHENG YEN directly, but most carry on the routine work of maintaining and supporting the temple, taking turns gardening, cooking, and manufacturing candles and soy powder—the sales of which still support the small religious community of twenty-six women. All meals at the Pure Abode are vegetarian (with eggs), but the women strive to provide interesting variations since they often have guests. The day ends with a period of meditation, followed by dinner and “free time” until sleep.

Thus goes on in the Pure Abode a life of work and religious devotion that is timeless in its simplicity and that exists in sharp contrast to the surging modernization of Taiwan, driven by money and technology and made vulgar by pollution, noise, and the thoughtless exploitation and neglect of resources and people. Just as the Pure Abode temple stands serene amidst the bustle of present-day Hualien—now linked to the west coast by train and caught up in Taiwan’s rapid growth—so too do Shih CHENG YEN’s Buddhist teachings help modern Taiwanese find peace and meaning in their rapidly changing society.

Shih CHENG YEN turned fifty-four in 1991. She is a thin, frail-looking dynamo. Like other venerable Buddhist nuns of China’s past, she has overcome family resistance, personal adversity, and public skepticism to accomplish great deeds of love and charity. As a modern Dharma Master, CHENG YEN’s message is startlingly simple. “Buddhism is not lofty or difficult to grasp,” she says. Buddhism is already in our lives. We need only bring out the knowledge and talent that lies innate within us. To do so we should beware of greed, for if we are “muddled in our desire for possessions and material goods,” she teaches, “our original good nature strays further and further away from us.” We should also beware of popular superstitions about lucky days and lucky places and, instead, “believe with wisdom.” Do something! she says, “Give compassion a form with concrete action,” and be kind, for “kindness is pure love.”

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Manila

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