

VITA OF THE VENERABLE MASTER HSU YUN

Hsu Yun (from 1840 to 1959), was a renowned Chan (Zen) master and one of the most influential Buddhist teachers of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Early life

Ven. Master Hsu Yun was born on April 26 in Fukien, in Imperial China. His mother died during childbirth. In the 30th year of the Tao Kuang reign period (1850), when the Master was eleven years old, his father returned to Ch'uan Chou. The aging grandmother of the Chou clan was determined that her grandson would have a wife. In order to continue both his and his uncle's lineage, the Master was to marry one woman from the T'ien family and one from the T'an family .

His first exposure to Buddhism was during the funeral of his grandmother. Soon afterward he began reading the Sutras, and later made a pilgrimage to Nanyo. When he was fourteen years old, he announced that he wished to renounce the material world in favour of monastic life. His father did not approve of Buddhism and had him instructed in Taoism instead. From the start, Hsu Yun was dissatisfied with Taoism, which he felt it could not reach the deeper truths of existence. The rooms of the Master's house were full of very old books. Going through them, he found a volume called the 'Story of Incense Mountain', which described the life of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva (Quan Yin). After reading the book, he was deeply

influenced and was aspired to go forth from the home-life to monkhood to practice the Buddhist Path in the future. He didn't want to be an official nor to be a wealthy man. He decided that a life of simplicity would exemplify his resolution to practice pure and lofty ideals .

When the Master was seventeen, he had already undergone the hardship of practicing Taoism for three years and was indeed disappointed. He constantly thought about leaving the home-life and joining the Buddhist Sangha. One day in his uncle's absence he attempted to flee to Nan Yo to shave his head and officially leave the home-life. Little did he know that on a winding mountain path he would encounter envoys sent by his uncle to intercept and escort him back. His aspiration was not realized and he was reproved and brought back home . When the Master arrived home, the family feared that he would escape again, so he was sent with his first cousin, Fu Kuo, to Ch'uan Chou. His father formally received the brides from the T'ien and T'an families for the Master, and the Master's marriage was completed. The Master, however, had already realized the emptiness of form. He held no view of a self or of others and had not the slightest thought of desire. He was clear of mind and pure in body. Therefore, although they dwelt together, he remained undefiled. Moreover, the Master extensively explained the Buddhadharma for the two women so that they too would practice the Buddhist path.

There was a deep bond of brotherly friendship and respect between the Master and Fu Kuo. Fu Kuo also had previously explored the Buddhadharma and had the same aspiration as the Master, so they

amicably traveled the Path together. In his nineteenth year, the Master, accompanied by Fu Kuo, started the journey to Ku Shan (Drum Mountain) in Fu Chou to leave home. Before leaving, he wrote the "Song of the Skinbag" . which he left behind for his two wives (the T'ien and T'an women) . It was at Kushan monastery that his head was shaved and he received ordination as a monk. When his father sent agents to find him, Hsu Yun concealed himself in a grotto behind the monastery, where he lived in austere solitude for three years. At the age of twenty-five, Hsu Yun learned that his father had died, and his stepmother and two wives had entered the monastic life.

During his years as a hermit, Hsu Yun made some of his most profound discoveries. He visited the old master Yung Ching, who encouraged him to abandon his extreme asceticism in favor of temperance. He instructed the young monk in the Sutras and told him to be mindful of the 'hua tou', "Who is dragging this corpse of mine?" In his thirty-sixth year, with the encouragement of Yung Ching, Hsu Yun went on a seven-year pilgrimage to P'u T'o Island off the coast of Ningpo, a place regarded by Buddhists as the bodhimandala of Avalokiteshvara. He went on to visit the monastery of King Asoka, and various other Ch'n holy places.

Middle Age and Enlightenment

At age forty-three, Hsu Yun had by now left the home-life for more than twenty years, but he had not yet completed his practice in the Path. He had not repaid his parents' kindness, and so he vowed to again make a pilgrimage to Nan Hai. From Fa Hua Temple all the way to Ch'ing Liang Peak at Wu T'ai (Five Peaks) Mountain Mount Wutai

of the northwest, the bodhimandala of Manjushri, he made one full prostration every three steps. He prayed for the rebirth of his parents in the Pure Land. Along the way, Hsu Yun is said to have met a beggar called Wen Chi, who twice saved his life. After talking with the monks at the Five-Peaked Mountain, Hsu Yun came to believe that the beggar had been an incarnation of Manjushri.

Having achieved singleness of mind, Hsu Yun traveled west and south, making his way through Tibet. He visited many monasteries and holy places, including the Potala, the seat of the Dalai Lama, and Tashilhunpo Monastery, the seat of the Panchen Lama. He traveled through India and Ceylon, and then across the sea to Burma. During this time of wandering, Hsu Yun felt his mind clearing and his health growing stronger.

Hsu Yun composed a large number of poems during this period. After returning to China, During the Master's fifty-third year, he joined with the Venerable Masters P'u Chao (Universal Illumination), Yueh Hsia (Moon Aura) and Yin Lien (Lotus Seal) to cultivate together. They climbed Chiu Hua Shan Mountain and repaired the huts on Ts'ui Feng Summit, where Dharma Master P'u Chao expounded the Mahavaipulyabuddha Avatamsaka (Flower Adornment) Sutra.

When the Master was fifty-six, the Abbot Yueh Lang (Clear Moon) of Gao Min Monastery Gaomin Temple, in Yangzhou was going to convene a continuous twelve-week session of dhyana meditation. Preparing to leave, the group asked the Master to go first. After reaching Ti Kang at T'ung (Great Penetration), he had to cross the water, but had no money. The ferry left without him. As he walked

along the river's edge, the Master suddenly lost his footing and fell into the rushing water, where he bobbed helplessly for a day and night until he was caught in a fisherman's net. He was carried to a nearby temple, where he was revived and treated for his injuries. Feeling ill, he nevertheless returned to Yangzhou. When asked by Gao Ming whether he would participate in the upcoming weeks of meditation, he politely declined, without revealing his illness. The temple had rules that those who were invited had to attend or else face punishment. In the end, Gao Ming had Hsu Yun were beaten with a wooden ruler. He willingly accepted this punishment, although it worsened his condition.

For the next several days, Hsu Yun sat in continuous meditation. In his autobiography, he wrote: "[in] the purity of my singleness of mind, I forgot all about my body. Twenty days later my illness vanished completely. From that moment, with all my thoughts entirely wiped out, my practice took effect throughout the day and night. My steps were as swift as if I was flying in the air. One evening, after meditation, I opened my eyes and suddenly saw that I was in brightness similar to broad daylight, in which I could see everything inside and outside the monastery..." But he knew that this occurrence was only a mental state, and that it was not at all rare. He did not become attached to this achievement, but continued his single-minded investigation of the topic, "who is mindful of the Buddha?" over and over again, he delved into this topic without interruption .

During the twelfth lunar month, on the third evening of the eighth week of the session, after six hours of sitting meditation, the attendant made his rounds, filling up the tea cups. The Master's hand

was burned by spilling boiling water, and his cup fell to the floor. At the sound of the crash, the root of his doubt was instantly severed. He was joyous beyond words at having fulfilled his lifelong ambition. It was as if he had just awakened from a dream, and he observed how the conditions of the past unravel. If he had not fallen into the river and become gravely ill, if he had not met good advisors, who plied him with both adversity and felicity, how would this present experience have been possible?

The Master's explanation in verse form says:

*When a cup fell down and struck the floor,
The sound of the crash was distinctly heard;
Emptiness was pulverized
And the mad mind stopped on the spot.
Another verse by the Venerable Master Hsu Yun says:
The hand let go -- the cup was shattered.
Family broken up, people have died -- there's no way to talk about such things.
Spring arrives, flowers are fragrant, and everywhere is infused with splendor.
The mountains, rivers, and great earth itself are just Tathagatas.*

Old Age

Master Hsu Yun tirelessly worked as a bodhisattva, teaching the precepts, explaining sutras, and restoring old temples. He worked throughout Asia and did not confine himself to one country. His large following was spread across Burma, Thailand, Malaya and Vietnam, as well as Tibet and China. Hsu Yun remained in China during World War II and after the rise of the People's Republic of China to support the Buddhist communities rather than retreat to the safety of Hong Kong

or Taiwan. After the Communists took over mainland China, he and his disciples were mistreated and tortured. In 1953, along with Dharma Master Yuan Ying and others, the Master formed the Chinese Buddhist Association at Kuang Chi (Extensive Aid) Monastery. The Master was nominated for the office of President, but he declined because of old age and ill health and assumed the title of Honorary President. The following resolutions were proposed to the government: 1) In all places, further destruction of monasteries and temples, the desecration of images, and the burning of sutras shall immediately cease; 2) the intimidation of bhikshus and bhikshunis to force their return to lay life will not be tolerated; and 3) all monastery property shall be returned forthwith, and there should be returned to the Sangha enough arable acreage to make the monasteries self-supporting. The petition was approved. The Master then represented the Association in receiving three gifts from a Buddhist delegation from Sri Lanka. The Master also responded to the invitation of Dharma Master Nan T'ung (Penetration to the South) to head another Dharma assembly at Lang Shan (Wolf Mountain) Monastery, where several thousand people from all over took refuge. He returned to Shanghai in the third lunar month, and the next month received a telegram from Peking requesting his presence in the Capital. The Master arrived and stayed at Kuang Chi (Extensive Aid) Monastery. Representatives of various Buddhist groups also were present, and the Chinese Buddhist Association was officially inaugurated. After a plenary meeting in which important policies were decided [some defiled monks suggested to change some precepts and rules, the Master scolded them and wrote an essay about the manifestation of the Dharma Ending Age], the Master went to Ta T'ung in Shanhsi Province and bowed to the large stone Buddhas in the

stone grottos at Yun Kang. They were quite imposing and magnificently carved.

In 1955, the Master, at one-hundred-and-sixteen, had completed the Accumulation of Fragrance Kitchen, the Five Contemplations Hall, and other construction projects, and held another meditation session. In the next year, the Master's one-hundred-and-seventeenth, he wrote a letter to the composer of this book, asking the latter to return to Yun Chu which, however, was impossible. The Great Hall and the Hall of the Heavenly Kings were completed, in addition to other monastery buildings, and Dharma Master Hai Teng (Sea Lamp) became Abbot. The Master continued to lecture Sutras and held a two-week meditation session. In 1957, when the Master was one hundred and eighteen, all of the work was completed, and more than one hundred Buddha images were cast. The Master continued to lecture the Sutras and held a three-week meditation session. There were now more than two hundred monks living at the monastery. At one-hundred and nineteen, in 1958, the Master was aided in the establishment of the Hai Hui (Sea-vast Assembly) Stupa by Chan Li Wu. In 1959, the Master's age was one-hundred-and-twenty, and he became ill during summer and fall.

On the twelfth day of the ninth lunar month, he knew that the time had come. The Master instructed his successors to earnestly and vigorously apply themselves to the cultivation of precepts, samadhi, and wisdom, in order to counteract greed, anger and stupidity. Telling them to forget themselves for the sake of the Dharma and to mutually cherish and respect one another, he then spoke the following gathas:

*A shrimp on land, covered with ants, does not jump back into the water.
As I wish to make water creatures happy, toss me into the river.
I would be pleased if they were to receive my body as an offering,
So that together they'll be certified to Bodhi and save living beings.*

Companions and friends in the Dharma, please do not worry, set your minds at ease.

*Life and death arise from karma just as the silkworm is trapped in its own cocoon.
If you do not lessen greed and confusion, then you are imprisoned by worry and joy,*

*If you want to get out of this tribulation, work very hard at our own cultivation.
Wonderfully mesh with non-production; with bright understanding, penetrate to the mind-ground.*

Cutting off feelings of love and of hate, Escape from the wheel before it's too late.

The triple non-outflow study must be attained, and the Four Applications of Mindfulness strictly maintained.

*Vow to protect the precepts, too, even though all is illusory lightning and dew.
Be certified as enlightened to true emptiness, and the ten thousand dharmas' oneness.*

The sorrow and joy of coming and going, are just causes flowing, like bubbles shifting on water.

*After my death, have my body cremated. Take the ashes of my bones and grind them into a fine powder. Add oil, sugar, flour, and mix. Please form them into pellets and deposit them in the rivers as an offering for the creatures therein.
This will fulfill my vow, and towards all of you I will feel unlimited gratitude.
Hsu Yun, one who repays his debts, bows in reverence.*

The Master entered Nirvana on the day Wu Ch'en of the month of Chia Hsu, in the year Chi Hai, between 1:00 and 3:00 p.m.

The gatha of Venerable Master Hsuan Hua says:

*After one hundred and twenty years, he entered Parinirvana.
For thousands of years into the future, please, under all circumstances,
O come again to save those in the Saha.
All sentient beings together raise up their heads in admiration;
None of the masses could have enough of gazing up at him.
May the Master fulfill the multitude's wishes!*

Significance

Hsu Yun was one of the most influential Chan masters of the past two centuries, and arguably the most important in modern Chinese history. Unlike Catholicism and other branches of Christianity, there was no organization in China that embraced all monastics in China, nor even all monastics within the same sect. Traditionally each monastery was autonomous, with authority resting on each respective abbot. This changed with the rule of the Communist Party. In 1953, the Chinese Buddhist Association was established at a meeting with 121 delegates in Beijing. The meeting also elected a chairman, 4 honorary chairmen, 7 vice-chairmen, a secretary general, 3 deputy secretaries-general, 18 members of a standing committee, and 93 directors. The 4 elected honorary chairmen were the Dalai Lama, the Panchen Lama, the Grand Lama of Inner Mongolia, and Hsu Yun himself.

Though Chan is less well known in the West compared to Japanese Zen, the teachings of Hsu Yun have persisted within Asia, and he is still a major figure of Pure Land Buddhism in East Asia. Outside of China, the influence of his teachings is strongest in Southeast Asia, particularly in Vietnam and Myanmar, as well as the Americas, where his teachings were transmitted through well known monastic students

such as Venerable Hsuan Hua and Venerable Jy Din Shakya (Zen Buddhist Order of Hsu Yun) and Venerable Fo Yuan.