

The Buddhist Approach to Hung-Fa (Expansion of the Dharma)

An interview with Mr. FOK Tou-hui

*Mr. Fok Tou-hui is the founder and director of the Dharmasthiti Buddhist Institute in Hong Kong. In the following interview with Dr. Peter Lee, Mr. Fok shares some of his thoughts on **hung-fa**, the Buddhist equivalent of the Christian concept of evangelization. Hung means to expand; fa is the teaching of the Buddha, called Dharma. Hun g-fa together means the expansion or propagation of the Dharma.*

What is the motivation for *hungfa*?

The impulse for *hung-fa* arises very naturally for someone who has found truth in the Dharma. By the Dharma we mean the teachings of the Gautama Buddha. The Buddha's teachings are taken by his followers to be the truth—the truth which liberates one from ignorance, greed, distress and so on. It is truth which can be testified in life. Once one has found such truth, one naturally wants others to achieve the same liberation. Whoever is enslaved by ignorance, greed, distress, and so on, is in a sorrowful state of existence. One who has found liberation or enlightenment feels sorry for those who are in such a sorrowful state of existence. Such a person has compassion (*tzu-pei*).

Compassion is not just sympathy; it leads to efforts to dispel the sorrowful state of existence without considering the cost to oneself. Compassion has three elements: The first is having sympathy for others who are suffering; the second is acting to remove the causes of suffering; the third is the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of others.

Compassion is the motivation for *hung-fa*. It arises very naturally and it expresses itself naturally in the spread or propagation of the Dharma, the Buddha's teaching.

What are the methods for *hungfa*?

Since *hung-fa* means the expansion of the Dharma, the transmission of the teachings of Buddha is the normal method. One way to do this is through lectures given by those who are already committed to the Dharma. Such lectures are not just for inquirers, but also for disciples as well.

Public lectures may also take the form of a debate with those who want to challenge Buddhist teachings. There were abbots who were known for the ability to argue the case for Buddhism in the face of challenge. In some monasteries, classes were given on “apologetics” and the disciples were put through sessions of vigorous debate before they could graduate.

I should add that teaching in the Buddhist setting consists not only of intellectual instructions but also involves practice on meditation. Indeed, meditation is an important part of the Dharma. People are drawn to the Dharma not only because of the wisdom it has to offer, but also because of the piety that is inherent in it. In this light, the spiritual attainment of a Dharma-master is in itself a magnetic attractive power for *hung-fa*, and the master’s instructions on meditation and the practice of meditation under his guidance are part of the “program” in a monastery.’

Then there were abbots who made it a point to go out to propagate the Dharma. Tao An (312-385) had a large following of disciples whom he prepared and then dispatched to go out teaching. Chien-chen (688-763) sailed to Japan (after several unsuccessful attempts) to carry out *hung-fa*, to expand the influence of the Buddhist teachings.

There were others who would rather stay behind, not stepping out of the monastery compound at all. But they would gladly receive visitors from abroad to sit at their feet. Huei-yuan (334-416) wanted to keep himself aloof from the mundane world; yet, because of his spiritual attainment and wide learning, he attracted many people to his monastery to learn about Buddhism.

Does *hungfa* call for a crossing of geographical or cultural boundaries?

Yes. To spread the teachings to the Buddha, one often reaches out beyond one’s familiar territory. Buddhism quickly spread far and wide from India to various countries in Asia. Indian monks travelled far and wide to propagate Buddhism. For example, the monk Shi Li-fang is said to have brought a number of sūtras to China about 220 B.C.E. The translation of the sūtras into Chinese was of crucial importance to the implantation of Buddhism in China. Foreign monks such as Dharmaraksa (3rd century C.E.) and Kumārajīva (5th century C.E.) also played an important role as missionaries and translators.

1. [Note: The establishment of monastic communities was invaluable in the spread of Buddhism. Buddhist piety filled a spiritual vacuum in China. Confucianism is ethical and rational, but thinly religious. Taoist religion bred folk religiosity but lacked discipline. Buddhist monastic piety met the “higher” spiritual needs of the Chinese people. A Dutch Sinologist, E. Zürcher, wrote a book entitled “The Buddhist Conquest of China” (1960). His thesis is that Buddhism “conquered” China in the early centuries by means of the monastic communities.]

Chien-chen was the St. Paul of Chinese Buddhism. He failed five times to cross the sea to Japan but succeeded on the sixth attempt. That was at a time of active Chinese-Japanese cultural exchange during the Tang dynasty. Japanese scholars had been coming to China to study the Buddhist sūtras and this shows that Buddhism already had a footing there. In order to establish a firmer foundation, the Japanese Buddhists invited Chien-chen to Japan to give authoritative instructions to this end. He in turn accepted the invitation and pursued it with a strong sense of mission. This explains why he was undaunted by repeated failures to reach Japan.

Chien-chen himself was an expert in medicine and in his entourage were monks who were well versed in literature and architecture. Thus, Chien-chen's mission was also a cultural expedition, something which probably aided his *hung-fa* efforts.

Huei-yuan, though he hardly ever stepped outside the monastery door, attracted many visitors to his monastery, including learned scholars and members of the literati. He conversed with his visitors on philosophy and mysticism as well as on literary subjects. In these encounters, his Buddhist thoughts became inculturated in Chinese soil and his explanation of Buddhism became more palatable to the Chinese educated gentry. Certainly this was a kind of *hung-fa* which stretched the frontiers of thought and culture.

Is inculturation a necessary process for the spread of Buddhism in China?

If by inculturation you mean the penetration into the deeper cultural layers, then naturally that is the most effective way to spread the influence of a religion or a system of thought in the given culture. Chinese Buddhism is a success story of inculturation; but it has taken centuries to accomplish the task of inculturation and it is a continuous process. The influence of Buddhist ideas is seen in Chinese literature, philosophy, art, architecture, folk mores and so on. It is in a similar way that Christian ideas have permeated the various aspects of western culture.

Yet, what may be called inculturation is not all there is to *hung-fa*. Strictly speaking, the aim is that the Dharma, *fā*, be accepted by the people. The question is left open as to how and when people will accept the Dharma. This is an important question, similar to the question regarding the relationship between social service and evangelism in Christian circles.

What else does *hungfa* include besides verbal communication?

As an expression of compassion, charity work is always a part of the Buddhist way. In fact, Buddhism in China has a long history of charity

work on behalf of the sick, the poor, and the aged. Buddhist monasteries often became temporary homes for travelling or disenchanting scholars. Nunneries became shelters for displaced girls.

In modern times, Cheng-yen, a Buddhist nun in Taiwan, has won public admiration for her charity work. She began with taking care of the sick, which led in turn to the founding of a modern hospital and, later on, the establishment of a nursing school and a college of medicine which have now become the nucleus of a Buddhist university. It is her spirit of compassion which is behind her vast network of charity organizations, and the same spirit of compassion has released the power to do good in thousands of Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike.

Rev. Cheng-yen does not preach or expound Buddhist doctrines, but the work of charity has the effect of *hung-fa*, expanding the impact of the Dharma.

Is *hungfa* ever in danger of being inwardly compulsive and outwardly belligerent?

I know that the Christian missionary movement in the past was identified with Western expansionism of the last century. I heard stories about Western missionaries who had a feeling of superiority over the Chinese people, but I believe that these phenomena are historical accidents rather than the expression of the essence of the Christian spirit. Similarly, I do not rule out the possibility of Buddhists supposedly engaged in *hung-fa* who have a militantly exclusivist tendency, showing no tolerance of other religions. Some of them may feel superior to others. There may also be Buddhists who are not at peace inside and not at ease with others, even when preaching Buddhism. But if there are such people, they are aberrations of the Buddhist spirit. The Buddhist way is peace inside and peace with others. Those who are committed to *hung-fa* have a strong sense of mission and they have tremendous drive. But they carry out their mission with calmness and confidence. Moreover, many of them win people over by their spiritual presence.

I have always liked the Christian expression “the Word became flesh”. My Buddhist version is that the wisdom of the Buddha can be lived by his followers, and that by the way they are, they win people to the teaching of the Buddha.

The expansion of the Dharma of the Buddha and the propagation of the teachings of Christ (evangelization or mission) are natural expressions of the followers of Buddha and the followers of Christ respectively. The contents of the two religious traditions are not the same. But the Buddhist

engaged in *hung-fa* and the Christian carrying on missionary work need not come into conflict with one another. They should, by all means, be committed to their respective faiths; but if the spirit in both cases is right, they will find that they have a good deal to give and learn from each other. Dialogue is the best means for this kind of give and take. This was confirmed by our dialogue series on “Beliefs and Life”.

The Soul Kite

Liam Fitzpatrick

I saw it try to fly today
into uncertain cloudways
as a young bird would,
courage in paper and wood.

I saw it lift and drop
and yet it would not stop
the crooked struggle to ascend
the fight with the wind

Or the other thing that faced it:
the kitestring in my grip,
anchor to black earth and me,
reeling in, as if I could, the free.