

A Model of Evangelization for an Interreligious World: A Reflection on Torch of Wisdom Movement in Taiwan

Prof. CHENG Chen-huang

Professor Cheng Chen-huang is chairman of the Standing Committee on Solidarity and Unification, World Fellowship of Buddhists. He is also the publisher of the Torch of Wisdom monthly magazine and News Weekly, president of Torch of Wisdom Publishing House and secretary general of the Torch of Wisdom Buddhist Association. In addition, he is Professor at Fo Kuang Shan China Institute of Buddhist Studies and of the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies. The following paper was presented at the Inter-Religio conference in Hong Kong in September 1993.

BACKGROUND

Overwhelmed by modern materialism, commercialism, and rationalism, people nowadays are casting more doubts on religion than ever before. It is because people believe in science, luxurious living and concrete proof rather than the direct experience, inner peace and insight advocated by religion. However, the external objects that are changing, limited and corruptible also seem unable to satisfy people's infinite desires. As a result, the more people pursue outwardly things, the more suffering people seem doomed to encounter. People are not necessarily leading a happier life in proportion to the economic growth that is taking place, and although people's life expectancy is longer than before, they live in a more lonely and miserable way.

In this context, people are in a rather inconsistent mental state. On one side, they badly need happiness; yet on the other side, they reject religion, the very thing that can provide them with true happiness. Facing this dilemma, religion is often in no better shape. Religion has the mission to give happiness to modern people. At the same time, it has the obligation to maintain its traditions. If religion cannot adjust its ways of propagating doctrine to the needs of modern people, it will certainly drown in the great ocean of sensual desires.

In the last forty years, Taiwan has experienced the same as or even

greater change than most other countries in the world. Materially, it has developed from a purely agricultural economy to an industrial and commercial economy; from a GNP per capita of US\$100 in 1950 to over UD\$10,000 in 1992. It has moved from an under-developed to a neo-developed country; from an isolated and authoritarian government to an open and democratic government, etc. In one word, Taiwan has changed tremendously. However, people in Taiwan haven't enjoyed a proportional increase in happiness.

Against this background, religion has gone through a rather difficult period, especially in the years up to 1988, when martial law was annulled. Among the religions, Buddhism seems to have endured the most hardship. Most people in Taiwan, or even in the whole of China, declare that they are Buddhists. Actually, the religion they believe in is a mixture of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism or shamanism. The majority of self-proclaimed Buddhists don't really understand the essence of the religion. Furthermore, the decline of Chinese Buddhism in the last five hundred years has blurred the true face of Buddhism.

Taiwan is a country of many religions. According to the government's census, twelve religions are registered with the government, with 17,025 temples or churches, 119,093 clergy, and 10,699,516 believers out of a total population of 20 million in 1992. The real number is believed to be many times this.

In the last forty years, Buddhism has had marvellous growth in both quantity and quality. One of the main reasons is the increasing involvement of intellectuals and the youth. In this case, the Torch of Wisdom (hereinafter TOW) is undoubtedly the major force. There follows a brief introduction to the Torch of Wisdom movement.

ORGANIZATIONS

At present, the Torch of Wisdom group consists of:

1. Torch of Wisdom Monthly, an 80-page magazine founded in November 1961. It is published in the Chinese language with an English Buddhist digest, and is devoted to the interpretation of Buddhist doctrine in modern terminology and thought. It was originally aimed at spreading Buddhism among university students and intellectuals of high education. Now its aim is to serve the whole Buddhist world.
2. Torch of Wisdom Publishing House, founded in 1971, has already published over ninety titles of Buddhist books in Chinese and English.

3. Torch of Wisdom News Weekly was founded in 1990. It is an English-Chinese bilingual with four pages, published weekly and devoted to the dissemination of Buddhism in modern life.
4. Torch of Wisdom Buddhist Association, founded in 1992, is devoted to the planning and sponsoring of Buddhist activities such as lectures, seminars, workshops, retreats, summer and winter camps, oration, music, wall poster and writing contests, etc.
5. The Torch of Wisdom Southern California Chapter was founded in 1982 and is devoted to the planning and sponsoring of Buddhist activities in southern California.
6. The Torch of Wisdom Southern Taiwan Chapter was founded in 1991 and is devoted to the planning and sponsoring of Buddhist activities in Southern Taiwan.
7. Yu Chia-chu Cultural and Educational Foundation was founded in 1981 and is devoted to the promotion of Buddhist activities and conferring of scholarships.
8. The Chan Yu-tsai Cultural and Educational Foundation was founded in 1961 and its function is very similar to the Yu Foundation.

BRIEF HISTORY

Torch of Wisdom was founded by the late Professor Chow Hsuen-teh in 1961. However his pioneering work in promoting Buddhism began earlier, in 1951, when he broadcast Buddhism on radio. He discovered that the only way to rejuvenate Buddhism was through intellectuals, especially young people with a higher level of education. To achieve his aim, he sought the assistance of Buddhist senior monks and lay-men. In 1958 he printed booklets which he distributed among university students. He urged the students to write papers after reading the booklets. Then he offered scholarships to the outstanding students and published the winning papers in book form. Four anthologies were thus published in four consecutive years from 1958 to 1961. Donations from local and overseas Buddhist leaders helped to make both ends meet.

In the meantime, Prof. Chow managed to help establish Ch'en Hsi Buddhist Society at the Taiwan National University. At that time, the Taiwan government prohibited all religious activities on campus. Therefore, Ch'en Hsi was registered as a society of Buddhist study, not Buddhist faith. Students were encouraged to study Buddhism as an academic subject, not to take faith in Buddhism as a religion. Since then, Buddhist study societies appeared like "spring bamboo shoots" in every university and college. Up to now, there are 79 student societies of this kind.

Influenced by this trend, many big companies or government units also created Buddhist societies.

Torch of Wisdom helped the students to set up Buddhist societies by giving them material and spiritual assistance. Thus more and more students took an interest in studying Buddhism and writing papers on Buddhism. TOW monthly was founded in 1961 to meet the requirements of the students. Among its many functions, TOW's main objectives are as follows:

1. To publish papers on Buddhism by scholars and students.
2. To carry news of student activities and Buddhist communities around the world.
3. To offer scholarships to students.
4. To sponsor lectures and other activities.
5. To distribute free books to the students.

Torch of Wisdom Publishing House was founded in 1961 to concentrate on publishing books on Buddhism and other related humanities. Since then, over 90 titles have been published.

To meet the trend of globalization, Torch of Wisdom set up a news agency in 1990 to publish Torch of Wisdom News Weekly. It aims to enhance the exchange of Buddhist news in the whole world. So far as I know, it is the only religious news weekly of its kind in existence in the world.

Legally, Torch of Wisdom is the first non-profit Buddhist organization registered with the government. Its board of directors is of a closed-up nature. In order to open Torch of Wisdom's doors to the public and to invite more people to participate in its management, Torch of Wisdom Buddhist Association was founded in 1992.

Yu and Ch'an Foundations were set up to solidify the support for Torch of Wisdom's activities. In addition to these two foundations, many individuals also donate to support Torch of Wisdom.

ACTIVITIES

Over its 30 years of history, Torch of Wisdom has grown steadily step by step. It continues to expand its service yet never changes its direction.

The following are its routine activities:

1. Publications: Monthly magazine, books, news weekly, either for free distribution or for sale.
2. Scholarships: Financial support is given to scholars or students studying Buddhism and related humanities. So far over 17 Million New Taiwan dollars have been distributed and over 70 different scholarships have been set up.

3. Student Buddhist society staff annual training camps: Each camp lasts for one week. Training courses include Buddhist philosophy, meditation, administration, management, communication, planning and execution of projects, research and development, procedure of meetings, speech and debate, organization and operation, etc.
4. Lectures, Buddhist seminars and workshops: These cover various fields of Buddhism to let the participants become familiar with the essence of Buddhism. For example, in the Summer of 1993, Torch of Wisdom held seven seminars each lasting from 6 to 8 days. Torch of Wisdom provided free meals, free boarding, free tuition, free textbooks, etc. Torch of Wisdom offers free courses. Everyone is free to attend the class with a free mind.
5. Oration, writing, music, wall-poster and debating contests: Torch of Wisdom offers sizeable prizes to increase the participant's interest in engaging in Buddhist cultural activities.
6. International Buddhist seminars: These are held in cooperation with local or foreign Buddhist organizations, universities or individuals to sponsor seminars on Buddhism. For example, Torch of Wisdom sponsored an international seminar on "Buddhist charity and modern society" from Jan. 7 to 9, 1994 in Taipei in cooperation with the University of Hawaii, U.S.A., North-eastern Fukukoshi University, Japan, and Tofuku University, Korea. Another seminar on "Graded steps to enlightenment" was held from Jan. 22 to Feb. 4, 1994 in cooperation with Kopan Monastery, Nepal.
7. Social charities: Torch of Wisdom concentrates its resources on Buddhist culture and education. Nevertheless, Torch of Wisdom never neglects its mission of social charity such as donating artificial limbs to the poor, donating living expenses to the orphanage or rehabilitation centres, etc.
8. Financial support for student Buddhist societies: Torch of Wisdom tries its best to facilitate students' activities in studying Buddhism.

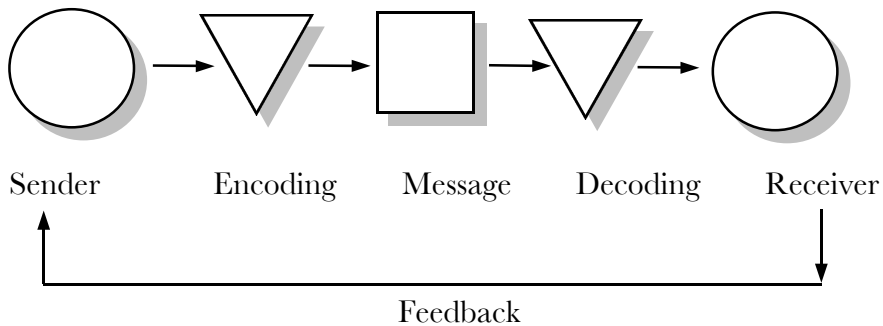
FINANCE

Torch of Wisdom is an organization made up of lay Buddhists. It offers free service to the public, yet it doesn't solicit donations from the public. All donations come voluntarily from those who agree with Torch of Wisdom's ideals, operation and character. Book sales contributed to part of the expenses. Torch of Wisdom opens its accounts to the public and therefore has very high credibility.

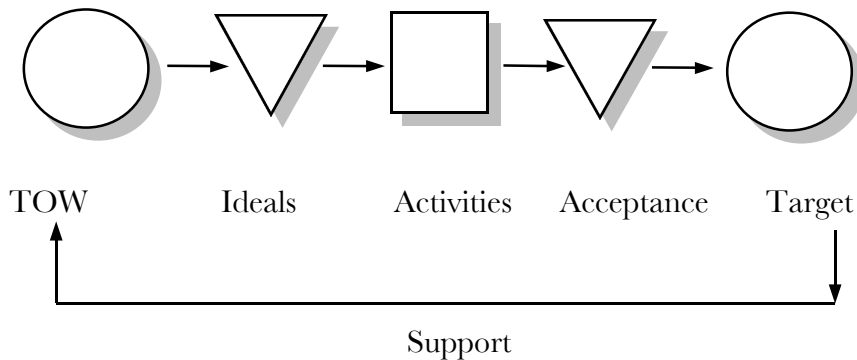
MODEL OF TORCH OF WISDOM MOVEMENT

The commonly used symbols for the model of communication shown in the figures on the following page can also be used to illustrate the workings of the Torch of Wisdom movement.

Communication Model



Torch of Wisdom Model



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|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ideals | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To modernize Buddhism 2. To internationalize Buddhism 3. To academize Buddhism 4. To “livingize” Buddhism |
| Organizations | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. TOW Monthly 2. TOW Publishing House 3. TOW News Weekly 4. TOW Buddhist Association 5. Yu Foundation 6. Ch’an Foundation |

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|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Finance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Donation from Directors 2. Donations from foundations 3. Donations from individuals 4. Sale of books |
| Targets | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. University Students 2. Educated Youth 3. General public of high education 4. Ordinary Buddhists |
| Activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Research on Buddhism 2. Propagation of Buddhism 3. Buddhist cultural programs 4. Buddhist educational programs 5. Social charities |

As in most cases, the communication process can be classified into five stages. The first half of the process, i.e. sender, encoding and message can be more easily handled by Torch of Wisdom. The first part can also easily determine the quality of the second part. From its inception, Torch of Wisdom has been a very healthy organization. Torch of Wisdom's directors are noble-minded and totally unselfish. They only give and never take, therefore the Torch of Wisdom has very high credibility. They are highly educated and far-sighted; therefore they can uphold very enlightened ideals, design very practical programs and put into place very useful activities. Thus they obtain a rather warm response from the target. Torch of Wisdom is small physically, yet great spiritually.

CONCLUSION

The way of evangelization should be varied according to the different conditions in an interreligious world. The Torch of Wisdom Movement is only one among many successful Taiwan experiences. This report serves to make you better understand contemporary Buddhism in Taiwan.