

The Buddhist Voyage beyond Death

The Buddhist Voyage beyond Death:

Living Nirvana

By

Venerable Dharma Master Hsin Tao

Translated and Edited by Chungmin Maria Tu

Cambridge
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PRAISE FOR MASTER HSIN TAO'S BOOK AND THIS TRANSLATION

This is an excellent translation of a Chinese book compiled by the disciples of Master Hsin Tao of Taiwan. It consists of lectures given by Master Hsin Tao and his responses to questions posed by his disciples. The original title of the Chinese book is "Observing Samsara as Nirvana". As the title clearly indicates, this book provides Master Hsin Tao's view about life and death, suffering and deliverance, based upon his own personal understanding and experience of Buddhism.

Hsin Tao is a Chan master who enjoys great respect in Taiwan. Founder of the Lingjiou (Vulture Peak) Mountain community outside Taipei, he has taught Chan meditation for a long time and attracted many followers. I have had the good fortune of meeting him a few times over the years and was deeply impressed by his spiritual charisma and skillful ways of explaining Buddhist concepts in contemporary language. The present book is a good example of this admirable ability.

In this book, Master Hsin Tao addresses two perennial questions: Where do we come from before we are born? Where do we go after we die? Many philosophers and religious thinkers, including Buddhist masters, have provided various answers in history. What is distinctive about the present book is the way Master Hsin Tao deals with these questions. He gives practical guidance to individuals on how to live a meaningful life without anxiety. He also provides concrete ways of caring for the dying as well as ritual commemoration for the dead. All these have received increasing attention among Buddhist communities in Taiwan. Because the writing is not technical but free flowing, which the translation reflects well, I believe this book will have wide appeal to American readers who are interested both in Buddhism and in what a contemporary Buddhist master has to say about these questions of vital importance.

Professor Tu herself is a Buddhist and has studied and practiced Buddhism. Because she was trained in comparative literature and philosophy, she has the academic credentials as well as personal experience to have translated the book with felicity.

Chün-fang Yü, Ph.D.

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TRANSLATOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I write this passage with deep gratitude and great relief. Had it not been for the initiative of Dharma Teacher Guang Guo (廣果師), and the support of many more people, this translation of Ven. Master Hsin Tao's Chinese-language book 觀生死即涅槃 (*Observing Samsara As Nirvana*) into the English version *The Buddhist Voyage beyond Death* would not have come into existence. Had it not been for the exhortations of Prof. Robert Magliola, my former professor and life-long friend as well as my spiritual father, this book would have been "stranded" somewhere as a lifetime "work in progress."

First, I pay greatest tribute to Ven. Master Hsin Tao, whose immense support and encouragement throughout my work here have made this translation possible. Second, I am indebted to Prof. Robert Magliola for his unreserved help: his academic proofreading, his insight into Buddhist doctrine, and his identification of the materials necessary for effective translation. Prof. Magliola also researched prospective publishers and kindly offered invaluable advice. I am also deeply indebted to Prof. Terence Gleeson for his long-term friendship and his assistance, often kindly available "on demand," in the English proofreading, editing, and formatting of this work. His shrewd comments on word choice, his sharp eye regarding English syntax, his extensive knowledge of Buddhism, his critical comments in relation to Buddhist concepts, and his wise view of life not only deeply impress me but also significantly enhanced the quality of this English version of Ven. Master Hsin Tao's original Chinese book.

My deep gratitude also goes to Prof. Peter Hershock, director of the Asian Studies Development Program and education specialist at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawai'i. Prof. Hershock generously helped me with his knowledge of the Buddhist publishing market and his keenly-observed review of the manuscript: His comments helped me to improve the translation and in general encouraged me to go forward. I am grateful

to Prof. Chün-fang Yü, the Sheng Yen Professor Emerita in Chinese Buddhist Studies at Columbia University, who, upon reading the manuscript, kindly wrote a letter of support for the book and provided me, during our phone conversation, with several prospective publishers.

I must in particular thank Dharma Teacher Liaoyi (了意師), who offered me timely counsel in the interpretation of classical Chinese in Buddhist scriptures. My thanks also go to Dharma Teacher Hengming (恆明師), Chingwei Deng (鄧慶偉), Peiyi Wu (吳佩怡), Shuyan Hong (洪淑妍), Tianzhi Xu (許恬智), Fengzhu Zheng (鄭鳳珠), and to my research assistant Evangelista Barylski, whose assistance in the assembly of all the miscellaneous materials accelerated the final publication of the book.

I also feel thankful to my family members: my husband Dr. Jianguo Chen, my elder son Adrian Lee, and my younger son Andy Chen, without whose sustained support this work would not exist. Seriously engaged in the proofreading work, Adrian Lee has conducted numerous conversations with me over the project in spite of his busy schedule at NYU School of Law. In doing so, he has also made great contributions to the interpretation of Buddhist terms in a modern context.

Chungmin Maria Tu, Ph.D.

FOREWORD

Manjusri asked: “What is the root of inverted thinking?”

Vimalakirti replied: “Baselessness [un-groundedness] is the root of inverted thinking.”

Manjusri asked: “What is the root of baselessness [un-groundedness]?”

Vimalakirti replied: “Manjusri, when something is baseless [ungrounded], how can it have any root? Therefore, from this baseless [ungrounded] root, everything arises.

—*The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti: A Mahāyāna Sutra*¹

At a time when so many in the world, especially the secular world of the West, live and move in the perceptible experiences which they call “reality” (so these “realists” declare themselves “rooted in reality”), it is so good to have someone like Master Hsin Tao, who comes precisely to turn everything upside down. He presents the world with a classical Buddhist reading of life-experiences: that their presumably grounded “reality” is only an illusion. He teaches, as Mahāyāna Buddhism does, that life-experiences in fact devolve, ultimately, from the Unconditioned, the infinitely spacious emptiness that is beyond the empirical. “Devolution” implies here “retrograde evolution,” that is, “degeneration.” From beginningless time, the Mahāyāna says, sentient beings—though they have the “original nature,” that is, the Unconditioned, as their “baseless root”—wander in greed, aversion, and ignorance. In Master Hsin Tao’s words, the very “ego-clinging” of these sentient beings has caused the “material

1. Robert Thurman, trans., *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti: A Mahāyāna Scripture* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 58.

congealment” which is their so-called “reality.” True spirituality, Master Hsin Tao teaches, brings us into contact with our “original nature,” and on to all-embracing Bodhisattvic (compassionate) activity. Bodhisattvic activity directs all sentient beings towards their “original nature,” the Unconditioned, the “Bright Void” or “Buddhahood.”

It is a great honor to introduce, by way of foreword, this first full-length English translation of a book by Master Hsin Tao. Its translator, Dr. Chungmin Maria Tu, now a professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Delaware, was my Master’s degree student during the early 1980s, when I was teaching Western literature and hermeneutics in Taiwan. Later I went on, in Thailand and elsewhere, to become steadily more involved in both Buddhist Studies and interreligious dialogue, especially Catholic-Buddhist dialogue. In June 2001 I made a closed retreat at Wu Sheng Monastery, Taiwan, Master Hsin Tao’s beautiful monastic complex perched on a high mountain overlooking the ocean and facing northeast. In late 2001, Guang Guo Fa Shi, a nun from Wu Sheng Monastery, became Director of the Ling Jiou Shan Center in Lower Manhattan, New York City. I affiliated with the Center at that time and became both a weekly interfaith retreatant and the advisor on interreligious concerns. Having maintained contact with Dr. Tu down through the years, it was a great pleasure for me to introduce her and her husband Dr. Jianguo Chen to Guang Guo Fa Shi in 2003. Dr. Tu, who is a devout Buddhist, went on to visit Master Hsin Tao in Taiwan, and to formally “Take Refuge” with him.

I am convinced that what needs to be emphasized most in this Foreword is that Master Hsin Tao represents a Chinese Buddhist tradition dating back to the first century CE, that is, one thousand nine hundred years ago, and that reached a high point already in the 6th century CE. The first forms of the Water-Land Ceremony he conducts each summer (his annual service is attended by tens of thousands), started about one thousand five hundred years ago! The Nyingma tradition in which he is an Incarnate Teacher started in Tibet about one thousand three hundred years ago. By reading what Master Hsin Tao teaches, one is “going back to the source.”

Nowadays, Buddhism in the West is often pallid, filtered, “toned-down,” if you will, so as to make it more marketable. Some forms of Western Zen bracket out what secularists would call the “other-worldly,” but which, for a true Buddhist, intimately interlaces the phenomenal world. See, for example, in Master Hsin Tao’s Preface his description of the cemetery scene, where the frightfully hungry ghosts crowd around him, first to cry and wail, and then to be assuaged and salved by him; and later, in Part Three, Chapter Thirteen, “Entering the Land of the Dead,” read his careful description of how this “enlacement” works. Note how Master Hsin Tao emphasizes that, to practice a far-reaching Bodhisattvic compassion and eventually achieve “omniscient wisdom,” one must preach a “correct understanding” of the road to liberation even to “a puppy or a bug”; one must invest a Buddha blessing even “into a moth” (see Part Two, Chapter Nine). One should offer the Buddhist Liberation Service for those many sentient beings one has “killed for food” in “current and previous lives,” and those one has “accidentally killed every moment and every second” (Part Three, Chapter Thirteen). These are widespread teachings in various Asian countries where Buddhism has a long history, yet Western Buddhists seldom hear them.

I want to call special attention also to Master Hsin Tao’s lengthy treatment of the Bardo of dying, Reality, and becoming or rebirth (Part Two, Chapter Ten). Several Tibetan Buddhist masters have released already, in English, their descriptions of this Bardo, and these renderings have attracted much attention from Western Buddhists. Master Hsin Tao’s account of the pertaining Bardo derives from the Nyingma Kathok Tibetan tradition of which he is an Incarnate Teacher, and its account of the Bardo diverges in some interesting respects from those of other traditions.

Several forms of Western Buddhism perform syncretistic operations, borrowing from other religions, producing a mishmash, and then reducing to the lowest common denominator. Still others mix in that which can be called “pop-science,” and “pop-psychology.” Several prominent Western Buddhists have recently published books that even reject the classical Buddhist doctrine of “rebirth,” though it is a keystone of historical

Buddhism from the time of Gotama Buddha himself (circa 6th cent.-5th cent. BCE).

This book is also for committed practitioners of other religions who sense themselves called to interreligious dialogue, and who seek to study Buddhism for such a purpose. The primary goal of authentic interreligious dialogue is not conversion, but mutual understanding, and—where the religions *do* agree—the mutual collaboration in charity for the good of the world (projects such as peace-making, refugee relief, environmental reform, etc.). In 2001, Master Hsin Tao established the Museum of World Religions (in Taipei) precisely to encourage peace and understanding in the world-wide “global village.” The religions of the world are different, often at bottom *very* different, but these very differences generate superjacent “samenesses” where the religions can *help* each other.² I am a committed Catholic, a lay Carmelite Tertiary in fact, but I have learned much from Buddhist practice that helps my Catholicism, especially in terms of the use of the body in prayer and meditation. Besides, people who sincerely cultivate a real “spirituality” sense an affinity, a “camaraderie” with one another. I see this camaraderie whenever I am at a gathering of Buddhist monks/nuns and Catholic monks/nuns together at an inter-monastic encounter (such meetings are encouraged by the Vatican). They feel “at home” with one another.

Every once in a while, I make exciting intellectual discoveries—I find practices in the two religions that differ but *echo* each other. For example, the Ultimate in Buddhism is the “Unconditioned,” and in Mahāyāna Buddhism the “Unconditioned” is the “Bright Void,” immaculate and pure. In Catholic Christianity, the Ultimate is the “Unconditioned,” that which our theologians call “God *in se*” (Divinity-in-itself), necessarily beyond human reach (though graced humans can “partake of the Divine nature,” that is, the relation is not a mere subject-object relation).

2. My most recent book demonstrates that Buddhists and Catholics must face their radical differences while learning how to share their samenesses: R. Magliola, *Facing Up To Real Doctrinal Difference: How Some Thought-Motifs From Derrida Can Nourish the Catholic-Buddhist Encounter* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2014).

Master Hsin Tao, in Part Two, Chapter Eight of this translation, speaks of phenomena, that is, the Conditioned (“qualitative formations,” “individual units”), the analysis of which (“observing the illusion”) points to the invisible Void (“the enlightening nature of the Emptiness”) which is the Unconditioned (the “Unlimited”). The great Catholic saint, St. John of the Cross, a Carmelite famous for the insight he gained through deep meditation, in his book *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, Book Two, Chapter 14,³ uses the analogy of “particles,” “specks of dust” (the conditioned, the phenomena) the analysis of which points to the invisible light (since the invisible light makes the phenomena visible). The invisible light, the Void, the Unconditioned, seems perfect darkness because it is immaculate and pure: The phenomena it impinges and therefore makes visible are the merely conditioned, the limited. When realizing this truth, says St. John of the Cross, one is in a state of “no time at all.”

Master Hsin Tao, in Part Three, Chapter Thirteen, warns his disciples that it is not only necessary to “settle” with our present foes, but it is also necessary to “settle” with our “foes from our previous lives,” that we must “make up” with our foes “for the grudges we established in our numberless past lives,” and that by so doing, “we liberate them from endless suffering” because they are no longer lured into hating us. Earlier, in Part Two, Chapter Nine, he says that the “second kind of memory” is that of “the memories others keep for us,” since “we are all part of each other’s memory matrix.” Here I bring to mind a central theme of St. Pope John Paul II’s teachings called “the purification of memory”: namely, that institutions and individuals must come to terms with past faults they have committed. The past must be revisited, he says, and self-serving past interpretations that “white-washed” institutional and personal sin need “a purification of memory.” This purification can only be accomplished by sincere public requests for forgiveness, and by penance (acts of atonement).

While Master Hsin Tao’s teaching is more radical than St. Pope John Paul’s, because Catholicism (like all Christianity) rejects the doctrine of

3. St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers (New York: Doubleday and Company / Image Books, 3rd rev. ed., 1958), 229-230.

“rebirth,” the recognition of the prime importance of “settling with the past” (in the case of institutional sin, even events from many centuries before) resonates with the spirit of the Buddhist teaching. Catholicism’s teaching of the Mystical Body, while less expansive than the collective memory-matrix explained by Master Hsin Tao, still strongly affirms the reciprocity of the members of the collective. If Mahāyāna Buddhism has the “Water-Land Ceremony,” Catholicism has many practices applied to the deceased who are undergoing purification in Purgatory, and Pope Francis recently consecrated the Jubilee Year of Mercy (Dec. 8, 2015-Nov. 20, 2016), during which special religious practices by the living can hasten the progress of the deceased through this “cleansing.”

In closing, I urge all readers to study and learn from this book. It is a Mahāyāna Buddhist practice to dedicate one’s efforts of spiritual “cultivation” to the Buddhas of the Ten Directions, all the Mahasattvas, all the Bodhisattvas, and all the Honored Ones; and to dedicate one’s merits for the sake of everyone, that all may attain the goal of freedom from delusion, attachment, and suffering, and gain happiness, tranquility, and perfect enlightenment. May all readers—each in her or his own way—“offer up” their study of this book, for the good of the whole world.

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PREFACE



The primary purpose of publishing *The Buddhist Voyage beyond Death* is to help us understand the true meaning of life by learning and practicing the Buddha-dharma. The Buddha-dharma tells us what life is by illustrating all its aspects: from birth to death, from death to rebirth, and from the past to the present to the future in the boundless universe, which includes the occurrence of life and its evolution. Through continuous practice and learning, we will eventually be able to witness the ultimate reality, and therefore live a fearless, empowered, and carefree life.

We are afraid of death because we do not understand life. We mistakenly believe that life is a perishable commodity and that after it is

used up, we human beings will lamentably embark on the path of death. It is very sad that we latch onto this misconception in our lifetime, because this misunderstanding renders us shortsighted, making us focus only on the existing limited life span. In so doing, we waste our invaluable energy by striving for illusive goals.

During the decades of my Buddhist practice—ever since my childhood—I have frequently encountered queries regarding death: questions about actual physical death, about the aftermath of grief over the death of the beloved, and about my own reflective thinking about the issues of life and death. These queries have caused me to reflect constantly on the “big questions” of existence, and through that reflection I have gradually become released from confusion. What I can offer here is nothing but my own experiences over the years.

As long as we allow the Buddha-dharma to enter into our mind, we will be able to break away from unbounded worries and restlessness, and just as a stream of cool spring water quenches the scorching fire, we will be able to taste the beauty and sweetness of life in tranquility. From my own experience of learning the Buddha-dharma, I have realized how deeply powerful and everlasting a strength the correct knowledge of life brings to me. It transforms the mind and then transforms the boundless external world by allowing us to serve all humankind. To live every day like this is what I seek.

I truly believe that everyone has deep affinity with Buddha because we all share the same fundamental needs and fears, and these find their answers in the Buddha-dharma. In approaching the unsurpassed Buddha-dharma, we come to understand that the only fruit worthy of our endless cultivation, through endless rebirths, is the wisdom that will liberate us from the fear and anxiety of death. We will not live a “real life” until we are thoroughly liberated.

Finally, may Buddha bless everyone with a fulfilled and prosperous life! Amitābha!

Master Hsin Tao

MASTER HSIN TAO'S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY: A BRIEF AUTOBIOGRAPHY



I started meditating when I was fifteen. Why? It is because my parents died early and I had to flee, travelling with guerrilla forces from the age of ten, during which time I witnessed wars and death, including the death of those who cared about me. Later on, I observed how grieved people are when their loved ones die, how helpless we are when we get sick, and how beset and vexed we become—beyond our own control—when we are emotionally frustrated. I felt then that life was filled with so much misery and was so grotesque.

There are myriad kinds of suffering in the world. For example, in Buddhism we recognize the suffering caused by unquenchable desire, or by encountering those with whom we have mutual enmity. The mutually hated people get to meet, but the mutually desired people are destined to part. Thus, the world we are engaged with renders us a great sense of

affliction that is given a name in Buddhism: “the ocean of suffering.” Another way to conceptualize this is “the house that is constantly burning.” It is as though we live in a burning house and may be burned into ashes at any moment by the fire of affliction. Because I saw all this torment, pain, and fear, I started going through deep and continuous pondering over how to transcend them. How can I get to a suffering-free place? I began my Buddhist practice due to my quest for such a place.

I learned that many reputable Buddhist monks chose the most rigorous ascetic approach to their own spiritual cultivation: They practiced meditation in a private retreat, either in the wilderness or in a cave or graveyard, using self-inflicted pain in order to get close to truth, get rid of worries, and break away from evils. What they achieved is the ultimate joy, freedom, peace, and serenity that their inner mind had never experienced before. Therefore, out of the great variety of spiritual practices, I chose the ascetic path just as they did.

I have always attempted to seek solutions for my own afflictions—my fear of aging, illness, and death—and I have sought to ease all the sufferings I have encountered over a lifetime. For example, we frequently encounter disagreeable or even malicious people, or unpleasant experiences despite our self-deceptive wish for the opposite. Our Buddhist practice aims to seek the routes for transcending death and for letting go of worries. Therefore, I emulated the Buddhist masters who preceded me in applying rigorous Buddhist practice: living in a shabby hut, meditating in nearby graveyards and in caves. With this kind of sincere approach, I endeavored to attain awakening of my true Buddha-nature by way of meditation and deep contemplation.

Because we do not comprehend the true or ultimate reality or *zhen ru shi xing* (真如實性)—that is, the truth of spirituality¹—we are destined to constantly enmesh ourselves in anxiety and rebirth. My determination to seek the ultimate reality finally led to my fasting in the cave. In the two years of fasting, I did not have any energy at all, and could have died at any time. In those moments, I tried to experience the impermanence of life and to grasp the true nature of our mind. With this true nature of your mind, you can sit here with me to listen to the Dharma lecture. In fact,

everyone is endowed with this true nature, or the innate perspicacity, yet not everyone can find it. Consequently, we end up constraining ourselves in various kinds of afflictions, in the cycles of life and death, in avarice, anger, and ignorance.

During those days that I lived in the graveyard, some ghosts would pay me a visit. I felt scared and sensed the fragility of the human condition. When meditating, I could feel their presence even though they were invisible. Due to their constant presence, I had no choice but to make progress in my spiritual practice. I dared not fall asleep even at night. I would wake up after briefly dozing off in meditation because I was afraid of being taken away by them. In short, I strived tremendously to progress in my meditation at the graveyard so as to obtain inner peace, understand the true nature of our mind, our spirituality, and attain ultimate freedom, inner stability, and contentment. Those invisible sentient beings helped me progress enormously to rid myself of clinging, and to become one with the true reality.

I also did my Buddhist practice in dilapidated buildings: the Yuanming old Temple at Qiaoxi Town and the ruins of the old castle of Zhoujuren in Yilan County. I felt as if I sheltered in a house without a roof, since both the walls and the roof were crumbling. To me the house was a living metaphor for the mundane world, which engenders fear in our minds. Meditating under such circumstances assured me again of the impermanence and uncertainty of earthly life, and pressed me to make tremendous progress in attaining the ultimate reality and shedding my afflictions.

My own way of spiritual practice is to awaken and improve myself through suffering itself. Most people only perceive the pain of suffering. But few know that suffering can enable us to comprehend the ultimate truth, to embrace the Buddha-dharma, and to testify to the incalculable worth of the knowledge of ultimate reality.

Through my ascetic style of life, I little by little realized the true meaning of existence: suffering, emptiness, and impermanence. Life is nothing but suffering, emptiness, and impermanence in which we are deeply trapped. We are used to what happens every day, and beset by

worries when we encounter the unfamiliar. Lost in confusion, we are deprived of our rationality and lead a life full of self-contradiction and delusion. These self-contradictory impulses cause numerous troubles.

Therefore, in learning the Buddha-dharma we must aim at achieving correct understanding (right view) or *zheng zhi jian* (正知見) and right mindfulness or *zheng nian* (正念), which will finally lead us to happiness and away from vexation. Every evil idea is entangled in turmoil; every evil deed is entangled with affliction. The nature of our ideas determines if we will be happy or unhappy. Upright views eventually lead to happiness. This is to say, we must cultivate correct understanding of existence, and right mindfulness.

Under the inspiration of Buddha's teaching, we strive to "do all possible charitable deeds and avoid doing any evil deed" so that our mind can become purified and free from pain. Moreover, we must "mortify our own mind" first and extend this self-discipline to help other individuals and society at large. Mortifying our own mind means breaking away from vexations and confusions.

The Buddha-dharma teaches us that we must comply with the five "don'ts" in order to shape a good character for ourselves. The precepts enable us to curb evil and to promote goodness. Only when our afflictions cease can we obtain happiness. The precepts can prevent the evils from occurring. There are five precepts and ten good deeds, as well as precepts for Bodhisattvas and precepts for monks and nuns. If people abide by them well, their troubles will cease. Abiding by the five precepts can protect us from falling downward into the Three Evil Paths of Rebirth: of Hell-beings, of Ghosts, and of Animals. Thus, precepts are the blessings we are given to help us avoid sinking into the evil paths and instead ascend to the Three Good Paths of Rebirth: of the Asura, of Humans, and of Celestial Beings.

In our cycles of rebirth, we must curb evils and promote goodness. Our present actions generate positive or negative consequences in the future: Goodness enables us to be happy, and evils enmesh us in vexation. Stuck in the cause-effect cycles of rebirth, our life and deeds produce change according to the law of cause and effect. Whatever we encounter,

perceive, and endure now is the “effect,” whereas whatever we are doing is a “cause.” Our behavior in the present becomes the foundation for our next life in the cycle of rebirth; it causes the effect we will perceive in the future. Thus we must pay special attention to our own deeds and words so as to create good karma for ourselves in the future.

In our “reincarnated” life, we must behave in accordance with “blessings” and “wisdom.” “Blessings” can be understood as giving, frequent giving—giving blessings to others, which can also be called “compassion.” “Wisdom” can be seen as letting go of our worries and feeling relaxed. Joyful “letting go” is wisdom, and compassion is blessing. If we constantly act in accordance with “letting go” and “compassion,” we will lead a life of blessings and wisdom. We can also think of “wisdom” as liberating ourselves from the constraints of distress, and “blessing” as what renders our life course smooth and what brings about adequate material circumstances. As we perform deeds of letting go and compassion, we take on the nature of a Bodhisattva; that is, we practice Bodhisattvic principles. “Bodhisattva” by definition refers to those who liberate all sentient beings from suffering, enabling these beings to attain the happiness through which the Bodhisattvas themselves can achieve enlightenment.

Every sentient being has the inherent potential of becoming Buddha. But it takes our efforts to make this happen. To become Buddha is to possess complete wisdom: comprehension of the ultimate reality of the cosmos, and of our own existential reality. The ultimate reality of the cosmos includes how the world was formed and evolved and why the world took form to begin with. Upon becoming Buddha, we will attain the complete and perfect understanding of the cosmos. Our own existential reality means where our life comes from, where it is headed, and why we are here. With this comprehension, we can say we understand life.

Because of rebirth, the form of our body keeps changing. Sometimes we change into a bird, a mammal, an insect, a fish, or some other form. That is to say, our body is an illusion that will vanish to nothing. But our spirituality will be reborn continuously. Therefore, we will unendingly be

reborn and we will unendingly re-die. But to die is, in fact, to be born/reborn, and to be born is to die.

Our spirituality is also called never-dying life. In the unending rebirths we are constantly changing our clothes: the bird's clothes, pig's clothes, fish's clothes. With clothes in the shape of a fish, our spirituality is called "fish." With clothes in the shape of a pig, it is called "pig." With clothes in the shape of a bird, it is called "bird." But our spirituality does not belong to any of these forms. Spirituality is formless and undying. It is enveloped within a form according to a certain cause. Our existing body in this life is formed as an effect caused by our behavior in our past lives.

Upon understanding the Buddha-dharma, we know how to keep our future life in our own hands and enrich it with better resources. Understanding the Buddha-dharma enables us to utilize our resources so as to gain a better harvest in the future. As long as we constantly undertake the work of compassion and contribution, we will certainly obtain happiness. After we realize the meaning of the Buddha-dharma, we will be moved to take a vow to become Buddha. Taking a vow means motivating ourselves to take actions. Taking a vow means committing to continuous effort at materializing the vow. By so doing, wisdom and blessings will come to us.

Starting with the practice of the Buddha-dharma by ourselves, we bring the good effect of the Dharma practice to the larger world so that others can obtain the same joy. This is called "Self-awakening and Other-awakening." Everyone should be concerned about the larger world. Those who can do this are called "Bodhisattvas." Those who do not care about society are called "followers of the Small Vehicle." We can accomplish only a little when we care only about ourselves. But we make an immense achievement when we embrace the welfare of others. Therefore, we should make a vow to help release all sentient beings from suffering. In order to attain the purification of the larger world, efforts must be made by everyone to promote the Buddha-dharma. Then, a peaceful and harmonious society will be around the corner.

EDITORIAL TEAM'S NOTE



The Buddhist Voyage beyond Death is the latest effort, after the publication of *Observing Spirituality as Bodhi: Chan Buddhism of Ven. Master Hsin Tao*,² to systematically formulate the Dharma teachings of Ven. Master Hsin Tao. Our motivation for editing this book originated with the realization that the Master's impromptu teachings are so profound, so multi-faceted and so deeply rooted in our everyday life that the small booklet *Observing Spirituality as Bodhi* cannot fully do justice to these teachings. It became necessary to prepare another compilation of the Master's teachings that would be comprehensive and systematic enough to enable people from all walks of life to enter the wonderful world of the Buddha-dharma so that they can benefit from it throughout their lives.

The Buddhist Voyage beyond Death grew from a preliminary project that focused on the ontological question of life and death, one of the

central topics in the lectures offered by Master Hsin Tao at various venues over the course of the past thirty years. In this book the Master, by revealing to us the ultimate reality of existence from his experiential understanding as a Buddhist practitioner/monk, helps us fully uncover the positive meaning of life and death by looking into the origin of existence.

There is an intense interest in the exploration of the issue of life and death both in the East and in the West. Accordingly, “thanatology” and “the science of life” have arisen in an attempt to balance the one-sidedness of conventional thought, which exclusively stresses materialism and instrumental rationalism in the modern world. We believe that the publication of this book is significant because we cannot truly love life and live it to its fullest unless we fully understand the real meaning of life and death.

We editors have decided to share with the reader a brief biographical sketch of Ven. Master Hsin Tao and explain his outstanding contribution to the mutual understanding of world religions. We want also to provide an account of the undertakings of Ling Jiou Mountain Buddhist Society in Taiwan and our collaboration with other international organizations.

Born in upper Burma in 1948 to ethnic Chinese parents, Ven. Master Hsin Tao was left orphaned and impoverished at an early age. Having been taken in by the remnants of military units of the Republic of China operating along the border of Yunnan, China, he was brought to Taiwan in 1961. At the age of 15, he was deeply moved by the compassion of Guanyin Bodhisattva—Avalokīteśvara (觀音菩薩)—and resolved to seek the supreme truth and to bring relief to all who suffer.

The death of a dear friend in 1972 brought him sudden insight into suffering and impermanence. He took ordination the following year under Ven. Master Hsing Yun (星雲法師) at Fo Guang Shan (佛光山), and entered Tsung Lin Buddhist College (叢林佛教大學) at the same time. Immediately thereafter he took the Triple Platform Full Ordination at Fa Yun Monastery (法雲寺) in Miaoli and was instructed in the “silent illumination” meditation practice of the Caodong (曹洞) School of Chan.

During the following ten years, Master Hsin Tao traveled on foot, practicing austerities in lonely and secluded locations. At the age of 26,

with the support of Ven. Master Yuan Guang (圓光法師), he began a practice of solitary meditation and austerities at Wai Shuang Xi in Taipei County. At the age of 27, he moved to the Yuan Ming Monastery in Jiao Xi to continue solitary practice. Ven. Master Ci Hang (慈航法師) and Ven. Master Hsing Yun (星雲法師) visited the ruined and desolate monastery, agreeing that Master Hsin Tao had found an excellent venue for overcoming fear.

Meditating for eighteen hours each day, he attained deep insight and a vision of Milarepa, who gave Master Hsin Tao the name “Pu Ren” and prophesied that he would overcome all obstacles and attain Buddhahood. In the realization that highly refined states of concentration are not the same as final liberation, in 1982 he began a two-year fast and retreat in order to overcome the subtle reservations lingering in his mind. In an old bunker near Yuan Shan, and later in a large crevice between boulders on the mountain of Lao Lan Shan, he put up a meditation platform and mosquito net in one corner, as well as an outdoor hut, meditating round the clock, rain or shine.

In June 1984, he established the Ling Jiou Mountain Wu Sheng Monastery. From 1989 to the present, Master Hsin Tao has shifted from asceticism to the Bodhisattva path of vows, visions, teaching the Dharma, and inter-religious dialogues. In 1993, the Preparatory Office of the Museum of World Religions (set up by the Ling Jiou Mountain Buddhist Foundation) organized its first conference. The Vatican sent a cardinal to visit Ling Jiou Mountain, opening a new page in the history of inter-religious dialogue and exchange. In the same year, Master Hsin Tao took the Theravāda monastic precepts in Myanmar, with the Supreme Patriarch as preceptor.

In 1999, the Third Parliament of the World’s Religions was held in Cape Town, South Africa, attended by such luminaries as the Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela. Master Hsin Tao also attended and delivered two important speeches, and the Third Parliament of the World’s Religions recognized the importance of the Museum of World Religions, then in development. The Dalai Lama donated his personal bell and vajra to the

Museum, and the Vatican sent a formal certificate of blessing. In 2000, Master Hsin Tao was invited to attend the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders in New York as a member of the consultative committee. As the sole representative from Taiwan, Master Hsin Tao gave his blessing at the summit and discussed his pioneering efforts in establishing the Museum of World Religions.

In 2001, the Museum of World Religions held a grand opening ceremony with its themes of respect, tolerance, and universal love. That May he was recognized as an incarnate teacher of the Nyingma Kathok tradition of Tibetan Buddhism by His Holiness Mozha and was given the title Chökyi Dorje.

When Bamiyan's Buddha was destroyed by the Taliban in March 2001 and the World Trade Center was destroyed in the terrorist attack of September that same year, there was much talk of a clash of civilizations between Western culture and Islam. Dharma Master Hsin Tao appealed to Western governments to use Buddhism as a disinterested third party to serve as the mediator in resolving conflicts between the Western world and Islam. Although formal Buddhist-mediated talks between the West and Islam have not yet occurred, dialogue between Buddhists and Muslims was initiated. In 2002, Master Hsin Tao established the Global Family for Love and Peace (GFLP) in New York. In addition to offering help to numerous orphans in Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia, during the period 2002-2015, the GFLP organized fifteen Buddhist-Muslim dialogues in eleven countries: the United States, Malaysia, Indonesia, Iran, Morocco, Spain, Australia, France, China, India, and of course, Master Hsin Tao's home base, Taiwan. In September, as the founder of the GFLP, he attended the 55th annual meeting of NGOs at the United Nations and joined Kofi Annan, then Secretary-General of the UN, and others to offer prayers on the first anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attack. In cooperation with the Goldin Institute for International Partnership & Peace, in 2004 the Ling Jiou Mountain Buddhist Society organized the Forum "Spirituality and Ecological Sustainability: Water—Our Common Source," which was attended by representatives from 22 countries, including Member of Parliament Sobhita Thera of Sri Lanka.

The forum led to cooperation among different religions in the disaster relief response to the 2004 tsunami in South and Southeast Asia. At the end of 2005, together with Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Daoists, Bahais, Buddhists, and followers of Yiguandao and Tiandijiao, Ling Jiou Mountain Buddhist Society set up the Alliance of Religions for South Asian Disaster Relief and built four hundred new homes for tsunami victims in Sri Lanka. In June, at the recommendation of Sobhita Thera, Master Hsin Tao received the “Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Promotion of Buddhism,” Sri Lanka’s highest honor for a Buddhist leader. Together with the Dalai Lama, Master Hsin Tao was awarded the Pt. Motilal Nehru National Award for Peace, Tolerance and Harmony by the Interfaith Harmony Foundation, an Indian Muslim religious exchange organization.

Since Ven. Master Hsin Tao completed an especially ascetic phase of his spiritual training, he has now elaborated his teachings impromptu to his disciples, based upon his own experiences of the Buddha-dharma. The chapters in *The Buddhist Voyage beyond Death* in which the Master explains his views of life and death are also derived from his experiences at the graveyard and in the cave. As we read this book, we should learn to follow the Master’s own logic and to appreciate his rustic linguistic expressions. Those who tend to think only in terms of logic should bear in mind that it may take a while to get used to the unique “grammar” of the Master’s idiosyncratic language in his impromptu lectures. The reader should not hurry the process of reading. Rather, s/he should carefully ruminate on the true meanings of the Master’s teachings.

Furthermore, the Master, after undergoing the ascetic process of spiritual cultivation at the graveyard and in the cave, has since been released from the fear of death. To him death is like a floating cloud and a passing breeze. He would like to say nothing more about it. However, due to the immense confusion about and hence fear of death that afflicts most people, the Master has chosen to elaborate on the topic by means of various metaphors.

The range of the Master’s answers to the same questions at different times reveals his deep perception of the level of understanding of his

various interlocutors. Each of his impromptu teachings epitomizes the essentials of his thought, reflecting the magnitude of his wisdom and the impeccable “wordlessness” of a Chan Master. As editors of the book, we tried to group the Master’s various lectures into the topics of the following chapters. We took great pains to ensure that we did not misrepresent what the Master means. It is imperative that the real acumen and spirit of a Chan Master do not get lost.

For this reason, we must admit that there is a great limitation in compiling this book regarding the representation of the Master’s Dharma teaching. The Master’s answers to questions on a specific occasion have a kind of logic connected to the questions asked in that specific context. The main topics vary from lecture to lecture. We as editors must select from the lectures those dialogues that relate closely to the issue of death and rebirth. In the process of selecting we might not be able to fully reproduce the true meaning of the original words in their original context. Also, it is difficult to fully represent those lectures due to the challenging process of transforming the Master’s original speech to written language and due to the act of selective compilation. So this book is only an initial attempt at presenting the Master’s teachings, and hopefully we will be able to present them in the form of *koans* in the future. We apologize for our limitations in this respect.

In addition, in the process of reading this book, the reader may notice that the Master tends to use contemporary metaphors as his “tools” to lead us to the multiple layers of profound thought of the Buddha-dharma, metaphors such as “memory matrix,” “computer chips,” “gene,” or the concepts of “space” and “time” in the chapter “The Enigma of Time and Space.” The reader should understand that these metaphors are used only to point at something that goes beyond. Otherwise, in the words of a Chan master, we will be lost in search of our own shadows and forget to look for the beauty of true nature.

Ling Jiou Mountain Three Vehicles Research Center Editorial Team