

Practice, Not Dogma Tzu-chi and the Buddhist Tradition

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Abstract

I argue that the practices of a religion are more important than its formal doctrines. Tzu-chi is an especially good example of a Buddhist movement that stresses practices of compassion rather than adherence to doctrines. Tzu-chi's practices are very modern, using the most advanced scientific methods and adhering to the highest professional standards in health care, disaster relief, education, and environmental protection. But they are also very traditional, focusing on compassion directed at suffering individuals and engaging the whole person, the body and the emotions as well as the mind. In line with other forms of humanistic Buddhism, it extends compassion globally to people of all faiths, ethnicities, and political ideologies. The development of large lay organizations like Tzu-chi has been made possible by the modern conditions of middle class life in Taiwan, where people have some freedom from the demands of unrelenting toil but are afflicted by inflammation of uncontrollable desires in a consumer capitalist society. Although Tzu-chi represents a remarkably creative response to the problems of modernity, it nonetheless faces challenges from modern pressures. The true success of Tzu-chi – not just growth in numbers but modern cultivation of the virtues of compassion – would have important implications for ecumenical engagement with the crises of modernity.¹

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The Buddhist tradition carries with it an enormous treasure house of teachings. The quantity of words in the sutras exceeds the Christian Bible and Patristic writings. Scholars like myself love words. Our instinct and inclination is to focus on the words and organize them systematically into theories. But in understanding religions this may be misleading. Before any theories come stories of actions. The ideas that religions teach are mainly ways of explaining such actions. The Buddha witnesses the inevitability of suffering, leaves his kingdom, goes into the forest, joins a group of ascetics but then seeks a middle way, sits under a Bodhi tree and reaches enlightenment. This story of action and its cosmic implications are eventually explained by sutras. Among the many schools of Buddhism there have long been debates about the relative importance of studying doctrines and performing practices. But actions always carry a surplus of meanings that can never be fully captured by any set of words. From the point of view of a scholar of comparative religion, I would argue, practices are the most important. Scholars as well as followers of religions should always be ready to move beyond doctrines to consider the practices that underpin religious life.

A general characteristic of Buddhist practices is that they are open-ended, constantly open to revision through skillful means in the light of new circumstances. A dominant metaphor is that of a “path.” One starts out on a path and strives to stick with it despite adversity but one can never fully know at the beginning where the path will lead. The main path in the Mahayana tradition was, of course, the *bodhisattva* path, whose main practice was boundless compassion. The practice of such compassion is not simply a means to some end. The practices of compassion are aimed at alleviating the suffering of sentient beings, but the practices are also ends in themselves. They are not defined simply in terms of their success in efficiently alleviating suffering. Even if one tries but fails with good intention to alleviate someone’s suffering, the act of compassion is still good, an expression of the Buddha nature embedded in all of us. The practices of compassion are a kind of ritual: expressive as well as utilitarian. The practices of compassion are also without boundaries. A *bodhisattva* can never limit compassion and will always seek new ways to practice it under the changing circumstances of the world.

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One part of the *bodhisattva* path leads to Tzu-chi. One of Master Cheng Yen's most notable sayings is: "Just do it!" Do not intellectualize. Act. In the library of Tzu-chi's headquarters is a large room full of binders documenting all of the works of compassion that Tzu-chi members have carried out. "These," said the person who showed me this room, "are our sutras."

The practice of compassion fostered through Tzu-chi follows the Buddhist tradition but in a modern way. The modernity is in line with the twentieth century reforms of Taixu and Yinshun with creative extension and adaptation by Cheng Yen. The modernity is evident in a kind of purification and professionalization of compassionate practice. By late imperial China, Buddhist practices had become mixed up with the utilitarian economic, social, and political practices of ordinary life. Buddhist rituals were often simply a means of raising money. Acts of helping others in the name of compassion were often just a means for gaining social status. Buddhist practices, even if carried out with little or no interior compassion, were often seen as a means to automatically acquire merit. In the minds of social and political reformers, Buddhists often acquired the reputation of being ignorant and even immoral.

The efforts of reformers like Taixu were to purify Buddhist practices by separating them from worldly motives of greed, delusion, and hatred. This meant refocusing on the specifically Buddhist character of the practices – differentiating Buddhism from normal economic and political activity. But having achieved (at least partially) such differentiation Buddhism should re-enter the world, strive to heal the wounds caused by greed, hatred, and delusion, and by eliciting everyone's Buddha nature, make this world into a loving, caring pureland. Master Cheng Yen, as well as other "humanistic" Buddhist masters especially in Taiwan, has further developed this vision by ensuring that Tzu-chi's works of compassion use the most advanced scientific methods and adhere to the highest professional standards in health care, disaster relief, education, and environmental protection.

At the same time that Tzu-chi is being very modern in this regard, it is adhering to some of the traditional aspects of the *bodhisattva* path. The practice of Buddhist compassion was traditionally directed not to abstract categories of people but to individual persons. It did not seek to change social structures but to help one individual at a time. Compassion also engaged the whole person, the body and the emotions, as well as the mind. As one followed the *bodhisattva* path, the continual practice of compassion changed one, caused one to develop *bodhisattva* virtues, that is, new habits of body, mind, and heart so that one

could more fully embrace all sentient beings with care and wisely understand the interconnectedness of all things. These virtues would transform one's whole personality, so that one would not simply act compassionately while, for example, working in a charitable organization but acting in a non-compassionate way at home.

Thus, while adhering to high professional standards, Tzu-chi's philanthropic work differs from that of modern secular organizations by emphasizing direct, one on one engagements between the givers and recipients. When handing out food and clothing to victims of disasters, Tzu-chi volunteers do so individually, face to face, if possible while looking at the recipient directly in the eyes and bowing in a gesture of respect. One sees similar forms of direct engagement in Tzu-chi's medical and educational work. The result is forms of giving that are not in the short run as efficient or cost-effective as the best practices of many NGOs. But *bodhisattva* compassion is not about costs, it is about personal engagement with others that can lead both giver and recipient to expand their minds and hearts to develop ever fuller degrees of compassion.

Throughout, the emphasis is on doing rather than studying. Most Tzu-chi members I have met do a lot of intellectual work, but it is not aimed at reconciling Buddhist philosophy with modern philosophy (although there are indeed important affinities that would be intriguing for scholars to explore). Although interested in Buddhist teachings, they learn these mostly from the writings of humanistic Buddhist masters like Cheng Yen, Hsing Yun, and Sheng Yen. Most of these are in the form of short aphorisms, stories told in dharma talks, or practical exhortations. As far as I know, there is no readily available systematic treatise on modern humanistic Buddhist philosophy and ethics. The intellectual work done by members of the modern sangha is mostly about how to imbue modern science and technology and modern professional best practices with a Buddhist spirit (itself learned through practice) to apply to the challenges of the modern world.

One of the challenges is the problem of pluralism: the coexistence of many different religions and ethnicities, which has all too often led to serious conflict. This potential problem, however, is as much a benefit as a liability for Tzu-chi. Although it has become extremely popular not only in Taiwan but throughout Asia, Tzu-chi members are still a minority in the populations there. Tzu-chi could not use its power, even if it wanted to – to impose its practices on any nation or group. In line with most eras in the Buddhist tradition, the new sangha presents its practices as invitations rather than prohibitions. What is not

generally provided in advice to lay members is a clear set of rules, like the monastic vinaya rules, for what one must not do. Exhortations are much more a matter of positive encouragement than negative warnings. Through various skillful means, they strive to cultivate deepening awareness of the fundamental interconnectedness of reality – to follow a path of cultivating virtues that would enable them to respond to novel situations with great compassion and true wisdom. The predominant ethic is a virtue ethic, not the application of complicated moral rules but the cultivation of expansive moral selves which can be properly motivated and wisely guided to bring healing and enlightenment to suffering beings everywhere.

In providing help to others, whether in the form of disaster relief, medical care, educational service, or environmental protection, Tzu-chi absolutely refuses to discriminate on the basis of race, religion, and political ideology. Nor is any effort made to proselytize recipients, although Tzu-chi members would of course be happy if people were inspired by their example to join them. They try as far as possible to adapt to the beliefs of their recipients. When I went with a team of Tzu-chi volunteers to visit a woman who was stricken with AIDS, for example, they noted that she was a Catholic and wanted me to help them sing some Catholic hymns to her rather than Buddhist songs. Whether in giving to their recipients or training their own members, the overall approach of Tzu-chi and the other lay Buddhist organizations on Taiwan is to encourage them to be better rather than criticize them for being bad.

All of this is based on more than pragmatic considerations. It is a basic principle of the *bodhisattva* ethic. One cultivates virtue by pushing oneself beyond the boundaries of one's comfort level. One should not only help family members but also neighbors; not only neighbors, but those far away, even those who might be considered one's enemies. This principle drives Tzu-chi's global outreach, even to places like China and North Korea, as well as to Islamic, Christian, or secular countries – where there is need for alleviation of suffering. The practice of extending compassion in ever widening circles is not only a pragmatic effort, but also a spiritual exercise. It makes the Buddhist heart bigger and the mind able to see the whole world as a big family.

Tzu-chi is then a modern form of classical Buddhist practice. One does not have to “officially” be a Buddhist to carry it out. Not all Tzu-chi members have formally “taken refuge” in a temple. Among Tzu-chi volunteers there are certainly people who are Christians, or perhaps even Muslims. One does not have to believe in Buddhist doctrine to carry out Tzu-chi acts of compassion.

Tzu-chi members welcome such non-believers. Yet, whatever they may believe, people who engage in Tzu-chi practices are being Buddhists, or more accurately bodhisattvas. They are following a path toward the fullness of life that originated in the Buddhist tradition and is inextricably connected to it.

What were the causes and conditions that enabled this modernization of traditional *bodhisattva* practice to arise in Taiwan's recent past? And what new challenges lie ahead to extend *bodhisattva* compassion without limit under modern conditions?

To cultivate, purify, and modernize such practices is generally not possible when people are consumed with the necessity of getting enough food and security for basic survival. The creative development of religious practices generally depends on what Robert Bellah calls a "relaxed field", that is, a space of leisure within which cultural creativity can take place. In much of the past two millennia, this meant that ordinary people, pressed with the unrelenting demands of back breaking farm labor, could not find the social space for cultivating the virtues of compassion except by "leaving the family" and joining a monastery. Ordinary people carried out Buddhist practices with a utilitarian attitude, as a means to get merit that might get them reincarnated into a pureland. Monastics were supposed to develop themselves more fully along the path to perfection and they could earn merit that could be given to ordinary people. But in modern middle class societies like Taiwan, people are not faced so much with pressing necessities for survival and they have the freedom to more fully develop the compassionate virtues themselves. Tzu-chi was a response to this new situation.

Tzu-chi is first and foremost a lay organization guided by commitment to *bodhisattva* compassion and closely connected to the monastic community established by Master Cheng Yen. It was Master Cheng Yen's genius to create such a vehicle for enabling lay people to develop their minds and hearts along the path of great compassion. The original social basis for this was the presence of a group of middle aged housewives in Hualien, who though not necessarily rich had enough economic security and leisure time to devote themselves to the cultivation of compassion. As Taiwan society became more prosperous, there were more and more people in this situation and more and more laypeople who could take advantage of the opportunities of Tzu-chi and of other lay Buddhist organizations established by other humanistic Buddhist monasteries. Another set of pressures that would have inhibited lay people from cultivating Buddhist compassion was the restrictions on association imposed by the martial law regime. When this was lifted in 1987 there was new freedom for many

more people to seek Buddhist cultivation. Membership in Tzu-chi and other lay organizations grew explosively.

Even as the “relaxed field” of relative freedom from economic necessities and political constraint opened new opportunities for lay people to follow the *bodhisattva* path without becoming a monk or nun, these freedoms were creating spiritual needs that made the *bodhisattva* path more attractive. People in Taiwan no longer had to worry about basic needs like food and shelter. But global advertising and all the other institutions of an open consumer society constantly created new needs – insatiable needs based on the artificially stimulated desires of a modern capitalist economy. Without a way to regulate these desires, to set reasonable priorities among them, many people face constant anxiety and face the prospect of meaninglessness. The opportunities for cultivation offered by Tzu-chi offer a way to achieve ultimate meaning and heal anxiety. The very demeanor of the volunteers one meets at a Tzu-chi event is remarkably serene. The activities they undertake are meticulously and harmoniously ordered. The atmosphere is like that of a monastery but without so many of the complicated vinaya rules.

The Buddhist middle way does not negate the good and beautiful benefits of a developed society, but it puts them in perspective. The Tzu-chi halls are adorned with beautiful flowers and artifacts. The uniforms of Tzu-chi commissioners are simple but elegant. At Tzu-chi venues, high quality tea is served in porcelain cups. When rebuilding houses destroyed in natural disasters, Tzu-chi ensures that the houses are airy and comfortable. When giving out aid to victims of disasters, Tzu-chi volunteers include not just food and water, but attractive clothing and other material accoutrements of a gracious way of living. The predominant effort is to affirm the benefits of modernity while curtailing the runaway desires that cause suffering.

Besides benefiting from economic freedom while helping to curb its excesses, Tzu-chi benefits from Taiwan’s political freedom while providing a partial refuge from its troubles. Taiwan’s transition to democracy has provided the opportunity for Taiwan to grow. But that democracy often leads to a cacophony of angry voices and sometimes seems headed for chaos. Tzu-chi stays away from partisan politics and the harmonious order of its activities provide a healing respite from the greed, delusion, and anger often provoked by contentious politics. At the same time, the virtues of generous compassion that Tzu-chi cultivates help engender the wisdom that citizens need to take a responsible role in democratic life.

Tzu-chi and other humanistic Buddhist organizations thus give laypeople a space to escape the troubles of late modernity, but not to escape completely. Rather they enable lay practitioners to return to the world so as to make it better. Tzu-chi members can make direct contact with friends and neighbors in a way that monastics cannot. They can also creatively combine their secular expertise with a Buddhist spirit. Examples would be the innovative gross anatomy program at the Tzu-chi medical school, which combines ways of expressing respect and gratitude toward the donated cadavers with advanced methods for teaching surgical techniques. Another example would be the pioneering establishment of palliative care in Tzu-chi hospitals. Other examples include the extraordinary creativity Tzu-chi members have put into multi-media education. Finally there are the efforts to encourage recycling and to make useful objects like blankets out of recycled plastic products. These and many others are examples of a level of modern creativity that could not have come out of the monastery itself.

The development of Tzu-chi is thus creating a new type of sanga, one that combines elements both of monastic life and lay life and expands the pursuit of virtue along the *bodhisattva* path. It is a sanga that is partially closed to provide an environment in which Buddhist virtue can be developed and open to the world which provides an arena for the exercise of that virtue. It is a traditional Buddhism reconfigured for a modern world.

This development of humanistic Buddhism has been made possible by the wise and creative leadership of Dharma Masters like Cheng Yen in the particular conditions of Taiwan over the past 50 years. But we know that the world is in constant change and the conditions that helped facilitate this efflorescence of compassionate practice will change too. We must anticipate the challenges that change may bring.

One way to anticipate the future is to look at the past. Although the Buddhist practice of compassion pushes beyond all limits, it has in history often been limited by the imperfections of people and institutions. One set of limitations can come from harsh rulers and a chaotic society that at certain times in history disrupted the spiritual path of Buddhists. Near the end of the Qing Dynasty, for example, the popular image of monks in China was that they were ignorant and corrupt, indeed one of the causes of China's weakness and an obstacle to its modernization. It was the task of reformers like Taixu to reform the sanga so that it could make a positive contribution to China's renewal and modernization.

Another set of limitations has at times come from the opposite direction -- from too favorable rulers who have coopted the sanga for their own political

purposes. One unfortunate example comes from the 20th century in Japan, where many Buddhist sects officially contributed to the “spiritual mobilization” for the war against China beginning in 1937.

Besides being corrupted or coopted by external political forces, the sanga has at various times and places limited its practice of compassion by turning inward. Monastics undergoing similar regimes of rigorous practices will naturally develop special affinities with one another. This can cause them to look down on the world they have left behind and to refuse to actively engage with it. They can cling to the routines of their practices without putting all their heart into them and without being driven by the spirit of boundless openness the practices are supposed to engender.

A final set of problems from the past comes from the hardening of ideas about the meaning of Buddhist practices into rigid dogma and a fixation by the sanga on elaborating the dogmas rather than engaging in the practices that lay behind them.

If such limitations have occurred at various times in the history of the monastic sanga, they could certainly befall the sanga of lay practitioners like Tzu-chi. But today there are also unique conditions and we need to consider the challenges they may bring. As before, there is the danger of the turmoil caused by the collapse of political order and the rise of tyrannical rulers. But today the problem is globalized and with the prevalence of weapons of mass destruction there is the potential for more cataclysmic destruction. Particularly dangerous are conflicts between different groups driven by religious fanaticism.

There is now of course an unprecedented ease of instantaneous global communication which not only helps bring the world together in mutually beneficial ways but overwhelms and distracts us with contradictory and often misleading information. Underneath all is an insatiable desire for economic growth that if left unregulated may lead to catastrophic climate change.

There is an overwhelming quality to the ensuing suffering, in some ways greater in breadth and depth than at any time since the Buddha was born. The anxiety created by this naturally leads many people to take refuge in the Buddha. The size of organizations like Tzu-chi is expanding. But because of the scope of troubles in the world the desire for refuge can become a wish to wall oneself off from the turbulent world rather than to extend compassion to where it is needed the most. For example, in some places in the USA, it seems that the membership of Tzu-chi is confined to the immigrant Taiwanese community. It becomes a place where one can meet with and enjoy the company of familiar others, people

who share the same language and cultural background, rather than a vehicle for reaching beyond these boundaries in compassion to the wider world.

Under these conditions, the very success of Tzu-chi can lead to limitations. It now has millions of members around the globe and it has grown extremely rapidly since the 1980s. But it can be difficult enough to cultivate the virtues of deep compassion in a monastery of one or two thousand who can devote almost every minute to spiritual development. How can this be done for millions of people who necessarily also have to attend to work and family life? The number of new members can so outpace the earlier generation that the newer members cannot learn from the wisdom of the older generation.

Also, with size – and money – there can arise the temptation to wall oneself off from outside advice and criticism and to develop a kind of arrogance. In a large complex organization it can be difficult to learn from inevitable mistakes. Some of the controversies about Tzu-chi in the media in recent years might be caused not simply by misunderstandings but genuine mistakes which the practice of compassion should push the community to genuinely address.

I offer these remarks not in a spirit of pessimism but of hope. As long as the challenges I have mentioned can be recognized, we can hope that they will be overcome, so that the practice of compassion can continue to surpass all boundaries. On the other hand, the large amounts of suffering created by the modern world cry out for large organizations like Tzu-chi to alleviate their pain.

The true success of Tzu-chi – not just growth in numbers but modern cultivation of the virtues of compassion – would have important implications for ecumenical engagement with the crises of modernity: a time when enormous technological advances have led not to global unity but to terrible conflicts rooted in the capitalistic greed, technological delusions, militarized anger, and ethnic hatreds of the modern world – with the nemesis of global climate change waiting in the wings. It is a period of social breakdown like the era that gave rise to Buddhism, Confucianism, prophetic Judaism, and Greek rationalism 2500 years ago – quests for spiritual unity that after initial flourishing were often subsumed by the wealth and power of ancient empires. Such disintegration, as before, can only be overcome through a renewed spiritual unity. So argued the great philosopher Karl Jaspers. But as he said, “The universality of a world order obligatory to all (in contrast to a world empire) is possible only when the multiple contents of faith remain free in their historical communication, without the unity of a universally valid doctrinal content. The common element of all faith in relation to world order can only be that everyone desires the ordering

of the foundations of existence, in a world community in which he has room to evolve with the peaceful means of the spirit.” This means that it is impossible – and be foolish to try -- to reconcile the ideas in the various belief systems that have been handed down in religious traditions. But it can be possible for people living within such tradition to mutually engage others through practice. The real development of a world spiritual unity will come (if it comes at all before we destroy ourselves) through confronting our interdependent problems through practices. Buddhist compassion is not the same thing as Christian love or Muslim brotherhood, although they share much more in common than they differ. Such overlap is the perfect common space to begin to develop a foundation for a peaceful world order – to make this globe a pureland.