

Chinese Buddhism Today: Impressions

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EVER SINCE I started teaching Chinese religions in a Danish high school in the 1970s, I have been in doubt as to “the situation of Buddhism in China today”—to use a common phrase. The sources of information have been conflicting, to say the least. Looking at “adherents.com” on the Internet, one finds statistics ranging from Buddhists being six percent of the population in China to thirty-three percent of it.¹ However, if you consult travel guides, there are claims that “Almost all Chinese people are Buddhists or/and Daoists,” but such figures are undoubtedly exaggerations.

As for Buddhism, the death knell has been sounded several times over the last century. A Danish observer in 1913, Jacob Hemmingsen, working for the Great Northern Telegraph Company, wrote that “*Buddhism*, which was imported from India in the first century CE, is practiced in its original, pure form in only a few major temples, and even there, it is practiced by a degenerate and morally corrupt class of monks and nuns.”² So much for the Danish engineer! A more well-known expert, Eric Zürcher, wrote the following in the 1950s after the Communist takeover: “In republican times [1911–1949] attempts were made to reform the creed [Buddhism] and with some success, but in view of the most recent developments a revival of Buddhism in China must be regarded as utterly improbable.”³ And, still, in the 1980s, there were many reports from China with news of a boom in Chinese Buddhism after the Cultural Revolution, but what was the truth?

¹ Adherents.com, “Buddhism,” http://www.adherents.com/Na/Na_87.html.

² Hemmingsen 1913, p. 45. Author’s translation.

³ Zürcher 1962, p. 62.

For me, I had to find out for myself, and so I travelled to China four times over the course of the six years between 2000 and 2006. On the first two trips, I was introduced to the Buddhist Association of China (Zhongguo Fojiao Xiehui 中国佛教协会) by the International Department of Higashi Honganji in Kyoto; on my third one, I followed a Buddhist monk over fourteen days in his daily chores, and on my last trip, I made my own visits to a number of temples in Xi'an 西安 without any introductions.

Boom or Slow Death?

Before getting to the difficult answer to this question, I must confess that, to some extent, I was in the hands of the government-supported Buddhist Association of China, and when talking of China, it is important to know from where you have your information. I am sure that some impressions may not be genuine and living Buddhism, but who can search the reins and hearts of people when it comes to religion? However, when it comes to the Buddhist monk I met on my second trip and with whom I stayed on my third one, I am in no doubt. His Buddhism is not state-subsidized or dependent on the tourist trade, but an individual choice with unpleasant consequences also.

My own answer to the question, boom or slow death, is of a middle-ground. Buddhism is not booming in China today, there is no vibrant religiosity, neither has Buddhism died out there. It is more alive in China today, I believe, than ever before during the last fifty years, but it is of moderate growth. The persecutions of the past have left scars, but all agree, and I too, that the tides have changed.

Statistics

There are 1.3 billion people in China, and depending on your definition of religion, there are about one hundred to two hundred million Buddhists. There are no membership requirements in Buddhism, or Daoism for that matter, so the state Bureau of Religious Affairs is obliged to make an estimate which says one hundred million, but this number is likely to be too conservative.⁴ When it comes to the number of monks, the bureau is on solid ground, as these are registered, and the number is two hundred thousand.

⁴ The *China Daily* reports in a 7 February 2007 article that, based on a study conducted by the East China Normal University, the number of people who consider themselves religious may be almost three hundred million, which is three times the figure suggested by the government.

Expressed in percentages, “only” ten to twenty percent of the Chinese population are religious and eighty to ninety percent irreligious, which is the inverse ratio of many Western countries.

What makes the overall census of adherents more difficult is the fact that, according to an anonymous informant, all religions have underground congregations who, for one reason or another, do not wish to be counted. It is a fact that when it comes to Christians, such congregations may be quite numerous, whereas it is less likely that Buddhists resort to such practices.

In any event, both the Buddhist Association of China and the state Bureau of Religions agree that there is a growing interest in Buddhism, and that the number of visitors to temples and monasteries is on the rise.

Interviews

I recorded the following two interviews, in 2000 and 2004 respectively, which describe the situation of Buddhism in China today as seen from the point of view of the government.

Interview with Mr. Zhang Lin 张琳, Deputy Secretary-General, Buddhist Association of China, at Guangji 广济 temple, Beijing, on 25 July 2000:

Q: What are the different kinds of Buddhism in China?

A: We think of Buddhism in China as having three important main schools: Han Buddhism, Vajrayāna Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism.

Q: What do you understand by Han Buddhism?

A: Han Buddhism is that which came to China during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). From there, it was further transmitted to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, so in that sense, it is the foundation of Buddhism in East Asia. Han Buddhism is also part of Mahayana Buddhism, and in that sense, it also covers Vajrayāna Buddhism, as this came from China to Tibet, and not from India.

Q: What are the most important schools in Han Buddhism as seen from a Chinese point of view?

A: Pure Land Buddhism (*jingtu* 净土) and the Meditation school (*chan* 禅), but there are many others. But those are the most popular nowadays, especially *jingtu*.

Q: Are these two schools clearly distinguished or are they mixed?

A: Do you mean, do these two schools have different scriptural traditions? *Jingtu* is distinguished by its practice of the chanting of

nianfo (Jp. *nenbutsu* 念佛), as in the Japanese Pure Land school. It is very easy to practice, no matter who you are, learned or unlearned. The Meditation school, on the other hand, is very difficult. It was introduced into China by Master Bodhidharma (Damo 達磨, 346?–528?).

Q: Who are the patriarchs of the Pure Land school?

A: They are three: Daochuo 道綽 (562–645), Tanluan 曇鸞 (476–542?) and Shandao 善導 (613–681).

Q: What about Vasubandhu (c. fifth century) and Nāgārjuna (c. second to third centuries)? Are they also considered patriarchs in China?

A: Vasubandhu and Nāgārjuna are very important for the background of the Pure Land school, but it was those three Chinese patriarchs who developed the school. And they are recognized as such by Pure Land Buddhists in Korea and Japan.

Q: In Japanese Jōdo Shinshū, one adds Genshin 源信 (942–1017) and Honen 法然 (1133–1212), but I take it that there are no later patriarchs in China than the three mentioned?

A: Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262) further developed Pure Land Buddhism in Japan, for instance he allowed monks to marry. That is not so in China, where monks stay monks and are not allowed to marry. Another difference is that in Japan, temples are strictly divided into Pure Land temples and other ones. Not so in China where they are not strictly organized as to a particular school. At home, however, the Chinese can follow the Pure Land practice of chanting *nianfo* only.

Q: Is it so that even today Pure Land monks are not allowed to marry?

A: Yes, we follow the old tradition of celibacy and live in monasteries. Also they are vegetarians.

Q: As Pure Land Buddhism is more loosely organized than in Japan, doesn't it make it more difficult to find out how many Pure Land followers you have in China?

A: In China today, there are no exact numbers, but a twelfth of the population are Buddhists—more than one hundred million—and the Pure Land school is the biggest. We say that six out of ten Buddhists are Pure Land Buddhists and the remaining four are of the Meditation school. But there are no sharp divisions: the people who practice *nianfo* also practice meditation and vice versa. And

this is the same in monasteries, so there is no sharp division in practice.

Q: The Buddhist Association of China, I take it, covers all the schools of Buddhism in China.

A: Yes, it is *the* organization of all Buddhists in China—more than one hundred million people, which is the biggest association of Buddhists in the world. About the size of or bigger than the population of all of Japan.

Q: Let me ask you about the situation of Buddhism in China today. Is there a flowering of Buddhism or has fifty years of Maoism destroyed it?

A: Although Chinese Buddhism suffered a lot during the Cultural Revolution, it and other religions in China are flourishing again. To give an example, on important Buddhist holidays, like the birthday of Lord Buddha, about forty thousand people come to this temple, Guangji, to celebrate it. Today, we can practice our religion freely, as you can see if you observe our daily service at 4:00 p.m. We know that people abroad think that our government treats our religions badly, but this is not true. Chinese monks are in no way threatened.

Q: Is it possible to compare Chinese religions, Buddhism in particular, to those in the West as a private and personal matter?

A: Yes, also the government thinks that, but you must obey the law, which if you go against, you will be punished.

Q: Are you in other words referring to Falun Gong 法轮功?

A: Yes, they are evil people who have stolen their ideas from Buddhism, Daoism, and other religions, and mixed them all together, calling it *qigong* 气功, which it is not.

Q: Is Falun Gong a religion or a mass movement of sorts? What is it?

A: It is not a mass movement, but an evil organization in the name of religion. In order to be a religion as recognized in China, one has to have a holy scripture or a founder, priests, a headquarters, and ceremonies. Falun Gong uses other religions' scriptures and misuses *qigong*. It misleads people who fall ill by cheating them with miraculous cures. And the meditation it practices is a corrupt sort of Buddhist meditation. It manipulates. The truth is that inside China, it has no influence but the outside world thinks it is a big movement. In China nobody knows about Falun Gong.

Q: Does the Bureau of Religious Affairs have any influence, apart from being the place where one can register a religion and a bureau which keeps tabs on religion?

A: The bureau is organized according to the law. Recognizing a religion is not so important. Whether one is recognized or not, one can still be a Buddhist. But it helps us in matters such as building new temples.

Q: But does it keep statistics?

A: It publishes “White Books” every year on religions, in which one can read all about religions. You can ask about it in Denmark if you go to the Chinese Embassy in Copenhagen.

Interview with Mr. Qu Jun Zhong 龔俊忠, Vice Secretary-General, Buddhist Association of China, at Guangji temple, Beijing, on 21 June 2004:

Q: When I came here today, I noticed that the temple was being redecorated. Is this part of the Buddhist revival in China?

A: As you may know, three or maybe four years ago, we started restoring not only the paint work but also repairing the buildings. And this goes on at many temples in China today. And some of them are able to enlarge their grounds, too. One large temple has been given a big park, for instance. The government and local administrations support temples on a large scale these days. Many people come to them now and many become monks. The general situation of Chinese Buddhism is very good at present.

Q: Sometimes this revival is seen by foreign researchers as “tourist Buddhism.” What do you think of that?

A: In Chinese Buddhist temples, there are many old valuable statues, and the buildings themselves reflect traditional Chinese culture. As the Chinese economy has improved, Chinese people have started touring the country to see cultural landmarks. Therefore, they come to Buddhist temples and we cannot ask them, “Are you real Buddhists or ‘only tourists’?” Also many foreign tourists come—more than one hundred million a year. And with the money we get from entrance fees for instance, we can repair and renovate these temples.

Q: And what about the number of monks? Are there more and more who become such?

A: There are more than two hundred thousand today.

Q: In Japan, Buddhist priests are allowed to marry and the eldest son in that way may inherit his father's temple. What are the conditions in China?

A: Our Chinese tradition is the good old tradition, where monks and nuns shave their heads, say goodbye to their families and live in monasteries without marrying, where they eat only vegetarian food and do not drink alcohol. They are respected by the population and they give their lives to Buddhism. Japanese Buddhism comes from China, and in the beginning it kept this tradition, but later the clergy was allowed to marry and live ordinary lives, including eating meat and drinking alcohol.

Q: So you keep the old tradition for both monks and nuns?

A: Yes, and we separate the sexes into nunneries and monasteries.

Q: Do you have any difficulties recruiting monks and nuns, because they must face family pressures to remain in society at large?

A: Not really, but nuns and monks, in southern China especially, are not poor.

Q: The different schools of Buddhism, of which you find so many in Japan, each have their own headquarters and administrations, do these monks and nuns stay at the same nunneries and monasteries in China?

A: The difference is theoretical in Chinese Buddhism. They can practice meditation and chant *nianfo* in the same monastery. You can be a *chan* monk and a *jingtū* monk at the same place, where you have both a meditation hall and a hall for chanting. Or they meditate and chant in their cells.

Q: I find it more difficult than the last time I visited China four years ago to take pictures and video scenes in Chinese monasteries and nunneries. Is that so?

A: Because some of the Buddha statues are very old and may be damaged by the light of the flashes. But always you need to ask before.

Q: You, as part of the Buddhist Association of China, must know about the economy of the temples, today and how it was before.

A: At the end of the so-called Cultural Revolution, Buddhist monasteries were very poor and many were damaged. So the central government gave local governments money to do restoration work, especially those with historical importance. These are

still supported by the government. But with the development of the Chinese economy, monasteries have become richer and richer from entrance fees. We still need money, and if monasteries do not have enough, they can always ask for government support. Many temples in China are in mountainous areas, away from cities, and they need income from such fees and private donations in order to carry out the necessary repairs, but some do not.

Q: Do they also get money from conducting funerals?

A: Yes, but there are no fixed prices. Funeral ceremonies are recommended, because they help both the person who has passed away and the relatives to live on into old age. The relatives then donate money to the temple.

Q: To be educated as a Buddhist monk, do you have to go to a Buddhist academy, or what is the procedure?

A: We have more than thirty academies in China, also for Tibetan Buddhism, and the highest is in Beijing, at Fayuan 法源 Monastery, which will be enlarged soon. But they get the first basic training in monasteries after they have graduated from high school. And after the first year at the academy, they can also gain a Master's degree in Buddhism there.

Naturally, the last-mentioned led me on to Fayuan Monastery, where I had the following interview.

Interview with Mr. Xiang Xue 向學, Chief Monk and Head of the Education Department at the National Buddhist Academy, Fayuan Monastery, on 21 June 2004:

Q: When was this academy established?

A: In 1956, but it was closed during the Cultural Revolution and re-opened in 1980. Students here have to pass an entrance examination and they come from all over China. The monks are young.

Q: How many students?

A: Over one hundred.

Q: Did any damage occur during the Cultural Revolution?

A: The buildings were not destroyed and most of the statues in the main halls were not damaged, but some were. Many statues today are from other parts of China.

Q: Was the famous sutra library in any way damaged?

A: Most of the sutras were not damaged, and after the re-opening, we re-established the library where we have collected many sutras

from all over China, especially old and rare ones. Modern sutras and books of Buddhism are on display, but not rare ones.

Q: So this must be a very important place for Buddhism in China.

A: Indeed, it is very famous—not only in China, but in the world. And most of the well-known monks have graduated from this academy. It is number one in China!

Q: The students who graduate from here, where do they go?

A: They study for four years to get a BA and, of course, we also offer MAs. If they have good marks, they can stay for another three years and get an MA. Some go abroad after their BAs, to Sri Lanka, to England, and elsewhere, to continue their studies. Or they go back to the monastery they came from in the provinces and take over various positions to serve Chinese Buddhism. But they are not restricted in any sense, they can go to any monastery. But in order to get here, they must be monks, educated at local monasteries.

Q: So, contrary to Japan, there are no family temples or monasteries. What if they decide to marry?

A: It is very free. If they want to marry, they are no longer monks. But if you want to be a monk or continue to be one, you cannot have your own family. And a monk who wants to come to this academy must have a solid belief in Buddhism. Our examination is very strict, as in the strictest universities.

Q: Are the monks here *chan* Buddhists or *jingtu* Buddhists?

A: They are both and any Buddhist monk can study here after having passed the entrance exam, but mainly Chinese Han Buddhists come here. Still, both Tibetan and Theravada Buddhist monks can study here.

Q: How about international relations. Do you have many visitors?

A: Actually, we have a group of Japanese Buddhists coming tomorrow, and we have many exchanges—Sri Lanka, Thailand, Singapore, Japan, the United States, and England, of course. And the academy's principals have been or are presidents of the Buddhist Association of China.

Characteristics of Chinese Buddhism Today

In the following, I shall concentrate on what I believe are the characteristics of modern, and often classical, Chinese Buddhism. The first topic has already been touched upon in the interviews.

A) The mixing of *chan* and *jingtu* Buddhism

To me, the best illustration of this phenomenon is the one to be found in John Blofeld's *The Wheel of Life* (1972), although it may seem a bit dated nowadays. He is granted an interview with the grand *chan* master, Xuyun 虛雲 (1840–1959!):

The present Abbot was no other than the Venerable Hsü Yün [Xuyun], who was believed to be well over a hundred years old, though still able to walk as much as thirty miles a day. He was renowned all over China as the greatest living Master of Zen; so I was delighted to hear the unexpected news that he had just returned after an absence of several months spent in a distant province. Not long after my arrival, I excitedly followed Reverend Receiver of Guests to pay my respects to this almost mythical personage. I beheld a middle-sized man with a short, wispy beard and remarkably penetrating eyes. He was not precisely youthful-looking as I had been led to expect, but had one of those ageless faces not uncommon in China. Nobody could have guessed that he was already a centenarian. Finding myself in his presence, I became virtually tongue-tied and had to rack my brains for something to say, although there was so much that I could profitably have asked him. At last, I managed to ask:

“Is this famous monastery *purely* Zen, Your Reverence?”

“Oh yes,” he answered in a surprisingly vigorous voice. “It is a great centre of Zen.”

“So you do not worship Amida Buddha or keep his statue here?”

The question seemed to puzzle him, for he took some time to reply.

“But certainly we keep his statue here. Every morning and evening we perform rites before it and repeat the sacred name while circumambulating the altar.”

“Then the monastery is not *purely* Zen,” I persisted, puzzled in my turn.

“Why not? It is like every other Zen monastery in China. Why should it be different? Hundreds of years ago there were many sects, but the teachings have long been synthesized—which is as it should be. If by Zen you mean the practice of Zen meditation, why, that is the very essence of Buddhism. It leads to a direct perception of Reality in this life, enabling us to transcend duality and

go straight to the One Mind. This One Mind, otherwise known as our Original Nature, belongs to everybody and everything. But the method is very hard—hard even for those who practice it night and day for years on end. How many people are prepared or even able to do that? The monastery also has to serve the needs of simple people, illiterate people. How many of them would understand if we taught only the highest method? I speak of the farmers on our own land here and of the simple pilgrims who come for the great annual festivals. To them we offer that other way—repetition of the sacred name—which is yet the same way adapted for simple minds. They believe that by such repetition they will gain the Western Paradise and there receive divine teaching from Amida Buddha himself—teaching which will lead them directly to *Nirvana*.”

At once reluctantly and somewhat daringly I answered: “I see. But isn’t that a kind of—well, a sort of—of—er—deception? Good, no doubt, but. . . .”

I broke off, not so much in confusion as because the Venerable Hsü Yün was roaring with laughter.

“Deception? Deception? Ha, ha, ha, ha-ha! Not at all. Not a bit. No, of course not.”

“Then, Your Reverence, if you too believe in the Western Heaven and so on, why do you trouble to teach the much harder road to Zen?”

“I do not understand the distinction you are making. They are identical.”

“But—”

“Listen, Mr P’u [John Blofeld]. Zen manifests self-strength; Amidism manifests other-strength. You rely on your own efforts, or you rely on the saving power of Amida. Is that right?”

“Yes. But they are—I mean, they seem—entirely different from each other.”

I became aware that some of the other monks were beginning to look at me coldly, as though I were showing unpardonable rudeness in pertinaciously arguing with this renowned scholar and saint; but the Master, who was quite unperturbed, seemed to be enjoying himself.

“Why insist so much on this difference?” he asked. “You know that in reality there is nought but the One Mind. You may choose

to regard it as *in* you or *out* of you, but ‘in’ and ‘out’ have no ultimate significance whatever—just as you, Mr P’u, and I and Amida Buddha have no *real* separateness. In ordinary life, self is self and other is other; in reality they are the same. Take Bodhidharma who sat for nine years in front of a blank wall. What did he contemplate? What did he see? Nothing but his Original Self, the true Self beyond duality. Thus he saw Reality face to face. He was thereby freed from the Wheel and entered *Nirvana*, never to be reborn—unless voluntarily as a Bodhisattva.”

“Yet, Reverence, I do not think that Bodhidharma spoke of Amida. Or am I wrong?”

“True, true. He did not. But when Farmer Wang comes to me for teaching, am I to speak to him of his Original Self or of Reality and so on? What do such terms mean to him? Morning and evening, he repeats the sacred name, concentrating on it until he grows oblivious of all else. Even in the fields, as he stoops to tend the rice, he repeats the name. In time, after a month, a year, a decade, a lifetime or several lifetimes, he achieves such a state of perfect concentration that duality is transcended and he, too, comes face to face with Reality. He calls the power by which he hopes to achieve this Amida; you call it Zen; I may call it Original Mind. What is the difference? The power he thought was outside himself was inside all the time.”

Deeply struck by this argument and anxious, perhaps, to display my acquaintance with the Zen way of putting things, I exclaimed:

“I see, I see. Bodhidharma entered the shrine-room from the sitting-room. Farmer Wang entered it through the kitchen, but they both arrived at the same place. I see.”

“No,” answered the Zen Master, “you do not see. They didn’t arrive at any place. They just discovered that there is no place for them to reach.”

This reply made me feel proud of myself. It seemed I *had* grasped the point correctly, for the Master had condescended to answer with one of those Zen paradoxes which force the hearer into even deeper understanding. His broad smile was enough to show that he was really satisfied with my reply.

“After all,” I added complacently, “it’s all a matter of *words*.”

Instead of nodding approvingly, the Venerable Hsü Yün turned away from me suddenly and began speaking on quite a different

subject to one of his disciples. His withdrawal was so pointed that for a moment, I felt hurt as by a harsh snub. Then I saw the point and almost laughed aloud. “Of course that’s it,” I said to myself. “The significance of that turning away is as clear as clear can be. It means, ‘On the contrary, it is all a matter of no words—*silence*.’ Of course that was it.” I prostrated myself and walked out to find the room allotted to me for the night.⁵

Whether John Blofeld acquitted himself well, I do not know. He certainly did his best to be a “good student,” but did he really succeed in understanding Xuyun? Or did the master turn away from him because John Blofeld blundered on, trying to vindicate himself?⁶

B) Meditation

Compared to many schools of Japanese Buddhism, the practice of meditation is more prevalent in China and another very important characteristic of Chinese Buddhism. This I found in studies of Chinese Buddhism, and in my own experience.

The above-mentioned Xuyun wrote an autobiography from which the following is taken. He had been ill with pneumonia for a while after falling into a river on his way to Gaomin 高旻, near Yangzhou 扬州. He was near death and meditated day and night. He writes:

My concentration became so pure that I did not know I had a body. After a little over twenty days, all my ailments were suddenly cured. . . . From this point on all my thoughts suddenly ceased. My work began to progress (*kung-fu lo-t’ang*). Day and night were the same. When I moved, it was like flying. One night during the rest from meditation, I opened my eyes and suddenly there was a great radiance like broad daylight. I could see through everything, inside and out. Through the walls that separated us I could see the verger urinating. I could also see a monk from the Western ranks who was in the latrine. Further off I could see boats going up and down the river, and trees on its banks of every kind and color. At this point three boards were struck [about

⁵ Blofeld 1972, pp. 87–90.

⁶ Compare the following extract from Franck 1991, p. 211: “When Bernard Leach, the great English ceramist, asked D.T. Suzuki to explain, in the context of his lifelong concentration on Zen, his later interest in Jōdo-Shinshū Buddhism, ‘the Road of the one, as contrasted to the Road of the many,’ Suzuki said, ‘If you think there is a division, you have not begun to understand—there is no dualism in Buddhism.’”

2:30 a.m.]. The next day I asked the verger and the monk from the Western ranks, and it was just as I had seen it. Since I knew that this was simply a mental state (*ching*), I did not consider it anything strange. In the last month of the year, on the third night of the eighth week, during the recess after the sixth period, the attendants poured hot water according to the rule. It splashed on my hand. The teacup fell to the ground and broke to bits with loud noise. Suddenly the roots of doubt were cut. In my whole life I had never felt such joy. It was like waking from a dream. I thought of the many decades of wandering since I became a monk. I thought of the hut by the Yellow River and how when that fellow asked me, I did not know what water was. At that moment, if I had kicked over Wen-chi's kettle and stove,⁷ I wonder what he would have said. And now if I had not fallen into the water and gotten very ill, if I had not been through easy times and hard times that taught me lessons and changed my understanding, I might have almost missed my chance in this life and then how could this day have ever come? For that reason I wrote the following gatha:

A cup crashed to the floor
 The sound was clear and sharp
 The emptiness was shattered
 And the turbulent mind fell suddenly to rest.⁸

My own informant, Shen Zhi 慎知, a Buddhist monk at Taoguang 韬光 monastery in Hangzhou 杭州, told me the following about his meditation, which combined chanting (often chanting *nianfo*) and meditation:

Q: When do you meditate?

A: All the time. As a matter of fact, meditation in your heart does not depend on time and place.

Q: Do you start in the morning?

A: Yes, every morning when I get up, I do nothing but meditate. I just have a cup of green tea and then meditation. Not even

⁷ When Xuyun in 1882 made a pilgrimage to Wutai-shan 五台山, he was helped out of difficulties along the way by a beggar, who gave his name as "Wen-chi" (in pinyin, Wenji) 文吉. Later, Xuyun realized that it had been the avatar of Wenshu 文殊, Mañjuśrī, Wutai-shan's presiding bodhisattva.

⁸ Welch 1967, pp. 82–83. See also Luk 1974, pp. 24–25.

incense. I meditate in my room here. After meditation you feel rich and your body is very strong. And then you have strength to study anything.

Q: And when do you get up?

A: I go to bed at midnight, after having meditated for the last time. I always meditate before sleeping until I cannot stay awake any more. Then I sleep for two or three hours, and I get up and start meditation about four o'clock in the morning.

Q: So you can do with only three or four hours of sleep?

A: Three hours are enough. If I sleep longer, my health goes bad. When you meditate, your health becomes better.

Q: So you meditate and study. What do you study?

A: For the moment I am studying English besides Buddhism. I read Hans Andersen in English, Denmark's famous author. The Buddhist master I am studying at the present moment is the founder of Tiantai 天台 Buddhism, Zhiyi 智顛 (538–597), who wrote about meditation in his study *Mohe Zhiguan* 摩訶止觀 [Great Calming and Meditation]. A very important book. Everybody knows him.

Q: Studying English and doing meditation you do for yourself. Do you have any obligations to others here?

A: I have, but if you do meditation, you need not do anything else. And meditation helps me do all kinds of things, including studying English. Because your mind becomes clear.

Q: What do you achieve by meditation: calmness or insight? And do you call it nirvana?

A: Nirvana means heaven. According to Amida Buddha (*Amitufo* 阿彌陀佛), we all go to heaven after we have finished our life. All believe in *Amitufo* and heaven, also all the monks. I, too. And I use his name when I meditate: *Namo Amitufo* 南无阿彌陀佛 (Praise be to Amida Buddha), also called *nianfo*. When you have said that a number of times, but have not reached a clear mind, you should open your eyes and say *Namo Amitufo* again. Then, when you continue for a long time, this voice continues of itself in your mind without your knowing. So this voice is the same as meditation, not two kinds but one. They are not divided, but only one, and your mind is the only thing that exists and it thinks about nothing. Then you will see the Truth and your brain will open so you know other things, your life, your future, where you will go,

and where your troubles come from. Also other people's lives will also be known. Buddhism means knowing your heart or your mind, and when you know that, you have grasped the Truth.⁹

C) Monasticism

The core of Chinese Buddhism must be sought in monasteries and nunneries—the latter exist but are very few. It is obvious that some of the popular monasteries are visited by many people, also tourists, from both abroad and domestically. They are the monasteries with standing and good connections with the Buddhist Association. Besides, there are quite a few which serve the local community and have built up activities that involve the townships. Monasteries in the countryside and in isolated places are more prone to suffer neglect, unless they are situated in areas like Wutai-shan where many pilgrims go.

The monks are celibate and break with their families in the sense that they do not inherit the family's possessions—and there are very few monasteries which are taken over by elder sons the way they were in the past. However, in a way the monks build up a new family, because they live with their fellow monks as a new family. The following description still covers the institution of monasticism, although it is a bit dated:

The “family” that owned the hereditary temple was composed of several generations of masters and disciples, all of them “heirs” (*tzu-sun*). The literal meaning of this term is “sons and grandsons,” but normally there was no blood relationship between any of the individuals involved. It was not like the present system in Japan where priests marry and a temple is usually passed down by the father to his son by blood. In China all these relationships were based on tonsure. When a monk shaved the head of a layman, the latter thereby became a novice (*sha-mi*), an heir of the monk's temple, and the monk's adopted son, termed in Chinese “tonsure disciple” (*t'i-t'ou ti-tzu*). Two tonsure disciples of the same generation in the same family were considered “brothers” or “cousins” (*shih hsiung-ti*). They had an obligation to keep up the worship of their “ancestors.” For example, when their master died, they performed rites to secure him a better rebirth, made regular offerings to his soul tablets, and swept his grave. . . . It is worth noting here, however, that the system appears to have

⁹ Interview with Shen Zhi, a Buddhist monk, at Taoguang monastery, in Hangzhou, on 28 June 2004.

been unique to Chinese Buddhism. In other religions disciples are aware of their lineage, that is, the succession of masters that connects them with some great teacher in the past; in Christian monasticism the monks of a monastery are often thought of as members of a family (the very word “abbot” means “father” in Aramaic); and in some Hindu orders the disciples of the same master refer to one another as *gurubhai* (an exact equivalent of *shih hsiung-ti*). But only in Chinese Buddhism have family institutions been so substantially translated from secular to monastic life—which is testimony, no doubt, to the strength of familism in the Chinese way of thinking. Even in traditional law the master and his disciples were considered a family.¹⁰

My informant, the monk Shen Zhi, is typical of the monkhood being an individual choice:

Q: In China, it is not very common to become a Buddhist monk. When did you become a monk?

A: Eleven years ago, when I was twenty-six.

Q: Before that, what did you do?

A: I went to senior school and after that, I worked for five years. First I worked in a post office, later I worked at an airport in Shanghai and later again, I was a cook in a restaurant on a holy Buddhist mountain.

Q: Why did you want to become a monk?

A: When I was young I, like many other boys, often used to practice kung fu, you know from films perhaps. But I was not satisfied when I grew older. Then I met with problems, like anybody else. And so it happened that I met a Buddhist nun. I did not know her kind of life and I wanted to know. She then gave me some books about Buddhism. When I read them, I found they contained many truths that all people should know. So I wanted to study these truths and did so for the next three years. My mind became strong and I wanted to go to a temple.

Q: Did you come to this temple?

A: No, I came to this temple only five years ago. Before that I visited many places in China, every famous mountain, every famous Buddhist place, to find a teacher.

¹⁰ Welch 1967, pp. 129–30.

Q: Why did you eventually come to this place?

A: Because my heart told me. And if you know the Truth, you can be happy anywhere. But when you start out to find the Truth, you should go everywhere to seek knowledge. . . .

Q: Did you receive some sort of ordination to become a Buddhist monk?

A: Five years ago, I started studying Buddhism in the Tiantai Academy, but only for one year. The best way to study Buddhism is by yourself. In a classroom there are too many students. But I went to see other masters in other temples in the mountains, where I stayed for three years. There, I learned a lot of things and grasped a little bit of the truth about meditation.¹¹

What Shen Zhi told me afterwards about his private life was that he was once engaged, before becoming a monk, and that the girl now has married. He felt then that splitting up had been difficult, but the best thing for him to do—and he is glad to see that his former girlfriend is happily married. When he told his own parents that he wanted to become a monk, they did not approve, but with the years they have established connections again and he sees his father and mother once or twice a year. His sister is married and he does not see her any more. Considering that in China the family ranks extremely high, there is no doubt that Shen Zhi's choice in life represents true sacrifice.

D) Moxibustion

Looking at Shen Zhi at close quarters, you will notice his scars from moxibustion, which is used as a part of traditional Chinese medicine for its supposed beneficial effects. In traditional Buddhism, monks and nuns underwent moxibustion when small cones of moxa, in three rows with four cones in each, were burned on their shaved scalps. According to some scholars, moxibustion was meant as a sacrifice, some think it was introduced as a way to identify and give legitimation to monks and nuns. The following description is from a Danish expert on Chinese Buddhism, J. Prip-Møller, author of the standard work on Buddhist architecture in China—*Chinese Buddhist Monasteries*.¹² In another, later work, he writes:

What remains of this description [of a Buddhist ordination] is the most painful part: the burning of—usually—twelve marks

¹¹ Interview with Shen Zhi, a Buddhist monk, at Taoguang monastery, in Hangzhou, on 28 June 2004.

¹² Prip-Møller 1937.

into the shaved scalps to show that the monk is willing to suffer for the Buddha. The places on the scalp are marked off by means of a straw, dipped in black ink. The novice takes a piece of string in his mouth, and the string is drawn over the nose and scalp to be tied at the back of his head. The twelve places are marked in ink as small circles along the string, so that the shape and size of the head are taken into consideration. Before the burning of moxa, the small cones of charcoal [moxa] are placed at these spots and lit, while an assisting monk holds the novice's head in a vice-like grip. The ritual is very painful, and whereas some, both nuns and monks, endure it all without batting an eyelid, I have also seen and heard how the prayer to Amitabha [Amida Buddha] goes faster and faster and ends in loud wails and tears with both young and old. Afterwards, you could see the ashes in the wounds.¹³

Today, the most conservative monks keep up this tradition, as can be seen from the last extract of my interview with Shen Zhi:

A: All monks should have moxibustion, but today some do not have it. In ancient times, all monks had such scars. It is very painful, and we do it for this reason: You can give away your money, but it is difficult to give your body. Money is something outside, your body is something inside. You should give a little bit of yourself to the Buddha.

Q: That makes it a sort of sacrifice, doesn't it?

A: Because the Buddha gives us the Truth, we say "Thank you very much" by doing a little, not by giving up your life, your body, but by giving a little bit of pain. Of course, your body does not belong to you. After you have finished your life, you may go to a new life in another country, like Denmark (laughs), because everybody's life continues. But the Buddha exists everywhere and the Truth is one.¹⁴

A Visit to Gaomin, Yangzhou

To put the characteristics together, with an added touch of the sometimes strict and raw atmosphere you can find in conservative Buddhist monasteries, a description of a visit to Gaomin near Yangzhou will serve. The monastery

¹³ Prip-Møller 1944, p. 148. Author's translation.

¹⁴ Interview with Shen Zhi, a Buddhist monk, at Taoguang monastery, in Hangzhou, on 28 June 2004.

has connections with the *chan* master, Xuyun, who meditated there (see above), and his younger follower, Laiguo 來果 (1881–1953), served as abbot there. The latter introduced a set of rules for monks, which were copied by other monasteries in the so-called Buddhist renaissance in the 1930s. The following quote, based on Laiguo's "Code of Rules of Gaomin," illustrates the harshness:

In the wandering monks hall of the T'ien-t'ung Ssu [at Ningbo], speaking in a loud voice is not allowed, but one may whisper in a sheltered spot. Here, however, [at the Kao-min Ssu], if two or three people seek out a quiet corner and talk in a low voice, they will immediately be expelled (*ts'ui-tan*). Visiting monks may not go outside the gates, nor intrude into the apartments of the monastery, nor wander about the [vegetable] garden or fields. Anyone detected will be severely punished and expelled. Daily devotions, meals, and chores are not to be missed, and those who break this rule even once shall be immediately expelled. Personally drawn up by the head of the monastery, Lai-kuo, on the first of the ninth month, 1936.¹⁵

The monk whose daily life I followed, Shen Zhi, had once been attached to this monastery and especially to its present abbot, Delin 德林, so I accompanied Shen Zhi when he wanted to pay the abbot a visit. We stayed in guest rooms for visitors, because nowadays Gaomin is open also for lay Buddhists who go into retreat at the monastery. We were able to move around freely, but it happened that Shen Zhi got into quarrels with other monks, for instance, when he and I wanted to observe the daily meditations in the Meditation Hall. It was for monks of Gaomin only. But the morning and evening recitations in the Buddha Hall were open to visitors.

One of Shen Zhi's jobs when he was a monk at Gaomin was, among other things, to cremate the dead bodies of monks. There are no burial rituals involved, which is a sign of the strictness of the place, I was told, but in a corner of the monastery grounds was a small shed in which a simple iron barrel served as a cremation oven. Shen Zhi, who at that time was no more than thirty, would put the body in the barrel, place pieces of wood of various sorts around it, and then light the wood before he went to bed. If everything worked out as planned, he would find the ashes in the morning. If not, he would find a charred body—and so build up the fire again for the next evening.

¹⁵ Welch 1967, pp. 14–15.

It should be added that in a nearby nunnery, across the Grand Canal, on which the monastery is situated, there is a hall of urns, and Laiguo himself has his urn stowed in a small chapel there. Even though death is of no importance to the strict *chan* monastery, still there is a need for a place to pay homage to the strictest of all abbots, Laiguo.

The present abbot, Delin is about ninety and he was fairly sick, so that it was not completely certain whether we could visit him or not. But the day after our arrival, we received a message that he had slept well and we should pay him a visit. In my own dairy, I wrote the following:

After breakfast we were granted an audience with Delin, the abbot. That is Shen Zhi, whose dharma-teacher is Delin, has got permission to meet him and tell the abbot about his present life, and when that is done, he can introduce me. I am told, before we go to the audience, that I am not supposed to put any questions to the chan master, but wait until I am asked before I open my mouth.

So there we are, the two of us, in front of the seriously ill, ninety-year-old Delin, who has heart problems. However, before we sit down the abbot has reproached Shen Zhi for not kowtowing in the correct manner. And to begin with, the abbot seems to be in a bad mood. He starts questioning Shen Zhi, and after the audience I get part of the conversation from Shen Zhi. The first question is: "What is the most important thing in Buddhism?" The abbot himself gives the right answer: "It is to be kind to one's fellow human beings and not to kill any living being. . . ."

The abbot does most of the talking himself, and a bit more lenient he goes on to talk about his own illness. "We are all equal," he says, "because we all know pain and suffering. This goes for all people in all nations." And it is here that he draws me in. "Who is the person accompanying you?" "He is from Denmark, is a teacher, studies Buddhism in particular and writes books." "Does he eat meat?" Finally I get a question and through Shen Zhi, I answer that I eat both vegetables and meat. "That is not good," comes the answer. "You must not eat meat, but I do not know anything about Denmark. Are there any Buddhists there?" "Very few, and hardly any Chinese Buddhists." "Well, tell your friend that he is welcome at this monastery, and that he is welcome to come again."

During the last part of the conversation, the abbot's face has grown considerably milder. And so we retire from the audience, satisfied.

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