

My Perspective on the Revival of Buddhism and Spirituality in China *by Yuan Yinhua*

A Taiwanese friend once told me that even when they were allowed to have more freedom in 1986, at the beginning they still had a police headquarters in their mind. He was trying to sympathize with me when I was being sensitive and reserved in our communication. I think that in approaching political and religious issues, I may well be much more cautious than many others in my country.

According to official statistics, there are about 100 million Buddhists in China. Since my grandfather chose Buddhism as his religion, all members of my family were registered as Buddhists on our household information card, even though we do not have to report our religion. In China, whether one has a religion or not, usually one will not experience particular advantages or disadvantages in one's social life. Yet when as a college student I was undergoing military training, my Muslim schoolmates were offered special meals.

In the education I received as a middle/high school student in the 1980s, religion was described as 'opium', just as Karl Marx had done. I regarded the phenomenon of people going to Buddhist temples to pray for a better life as superstition. At that time, though, my friends and I tended to conceive of 'truth' in predominantly socio-economic/socio-political terms, which nowadays I would regard as a somewhat limited approach.

In the 1980s and 1990s many political taboos were removed and the ideology seemed to be turned upside down, except in a few areas. Thus, under the leadership of the communist party of China, we experienced deep changes in nearly all aspects of life: social, political, economical, cultural, and religious. The intellectuals were reflecting on and re-evaluating our history, as well as Chinese spiritual traditions, while learning from the west with crazy enthusiasm. In one class in 1996, a professor addressed us: "*We are now talking about connecting with the world system. What is that system? The dominant world system is capitalism.*"

The last thirty years or so has seen a rich variety of works published, and we have enjoyed the growing freedom to choose our religion and express our personal opinions. This has been greatly boosted by the development of the internet. According to a recent official report, 123 million people used the internet in 2006. Today, for example, the New Age movement has developed a following, and many 'channeled teachings' (according to some people, various spirits use human beings as channels to give their teachings) have been translated into Chinese voluntarily and published on the web.

As a student of political science (1992-1996), I had realized that there were many theories about organizing a society, and there was a strong critique of the ideology I had believed in the past. In 1992-93, I was deeply touched by *'The Poverty of Historicism'* by Karl Popper, and I began to see that it was unlikely that I could realize the truth merely by academic study, which in the past was a vital means for me to find "*the rule of the development of the society*" and then to "*accelerate the process of social development*". At the time, I was also deeply touched by *'Introduction to Psychoanalysis'* by Sigmund Freud, and *'Man for Himself'* by Erich Fromm. Since then I have had a strong interest in seeing how we are conditioned by our human nature, by our education, by political and economical systems, etc. Rather than seeking "*the rule of the development of the society*", I started believing that awareness is the key for personal freedom, social development and international peace. For instance, in the past western people were closely associated for me with "*the invaders who shot and bombed our Chinese compatriots who were equipped with primitive weapons*". Fortunately, since connecting with my German friend Dhammaloka in 1995, this image of Westerners as 'the enemy' has faded and been overlaid by more affectionate feelings.

Perhaps these insights prepared the ground for me to be receptive to some Buddhist teachings, particularly as they were presented by Sangharakshita and his disciples. In 1999, after reading *'Meditation – The Buddhist Way of Tranquility and Insight'* by Kamalashila, I started practising meditation, i.e. the 'Mindfulness of Breathing' and 'Metta Bhavana' (Cultivation of Loving-kindness). It was deeply moving when I came across the phrases "focus blurred", "energy scattered" in the book. I realised that even for worldly success I needed to be able to focus on some goals. Moreover, the idea that "we are driven by emotion" greatly heightened my awareness of the limitations of reason. During my childhood education, I had formed the impression that reason was so important it was the core value of human existence, and that we must rely on it to put our selfish desires under control, and to realize our freedom by discovering the rule of the universe. However, I had been very confused by my desire to serve the people and my failure to get along with my peers. So, I was left wondering if perhaps I needed to cultivate emotional positivity if I really wanted to lead a compassionate life and control the frightening destructive forces within me; and especially if I wanted to protect myself from destructive forces outside of myself. Thus, I embraced Buddhism as a way to cultivate awareness and emotional positivity.

Whether there is rebirth or not, it is not so important to me. But for many people here, if you do not believe in rebirth, you will not be regarded as a Buddhist. And some people here understand Karma in quite a mechanical way: for example, if you did this, you will encounter certain consequences in a literal sense. Or, when someone has some misfortune in life, he/she might sigh, "*I must have done evil things in a past life!*"

As is true for other forms of spirituality, the revival of Buddhism is easy to see in China, and it includes the Tibetan schools. In some vegetarian restaurants and Buddhist shops in Beijing, we can see that the Tibetan teachers are worshiped and there are shrine rooms for them. In 2003, Dhammaloka and I visited an impressive temple in East China called Duobaojiang Si, which follows the Tibetan tradition and whose leading teacher (Master Zhimin) is Han Chinese. As far as I remember, at the time Master Zhimin was in his late seventies. He spoke a little English. During the meeting, he recommended a few books and various Buddhist teachers to me. His loving presence is still very much with me. I believe that he has genuine concern for my well-being.

The Guanghua temple in Fujian province (where I am from, and which shares the Taiwan strait with Taiwan), is one of the major publication centres of the monastic system in China. They had a study group on Lam Rim at the time when Dhammaloka and I were visiting. The study group was led by two Buddhist teachers from Taiwan, and one teacher from Duobaojiang Si. Our meeting with these three teachers was particularly satisfying to me. It seemed to me that we had transcended individual boundaries, and there was deep harmony and delight among us. It was a rare experience for me. They also had a meditation class for the students of the Buddhist college of Fujian. From our conversation with the meditation teacher I got the impression that he put a lot of emphasis on meditating in a particular posture, i.e. the lotus posture. He told us that the art of meditation had been practically lost and that they were re-introducing it primarily from the south-East Asian countries, Thailand in particular. It seemed that the students in general weren't strongly interested in meditation. During the visit, we also had a meeting with Master Bodhi, the education director. He told us that he found it very important to learn Buddhism in different languages and that they were open to learning from all traditions, including South-East Asian Buddhism. He had been invited to give Dharma lectures abroad, e.g. in Malaysia. A few years later, I met a few monks from the same temple on the train. They told me that he was now staying in Japan. This seems remarkable because for some monks and many Chinese people, China is the centre of Buddhism and it is the Chinese monks' duty to preach the Dharma in the world. In 2004, I attended a discussion of a study group led by monks in the Xiyuan temple in scenic Suzhou. There were about 40 lay people attending, all very interested in Buddhism. And I found the discussion delightful and engaging. The participants raised interesting questions: for instance, if someone wants to donate money he had acquired by unethical means, should the temple accept his donation? Other friends, like Lin from UK, also reported their visits to interesting Buddhist temples in China.

Even though I enjoyed being with these Buddhist monks and had a lot of respect for them, I did find it difficult to learn Buddhism in the traditional Buddhist context. It is difficult for me to believe that we have many life times, and that there are other realms of existence as described by Buddhism. (It is also difficult for me to believe that we only

