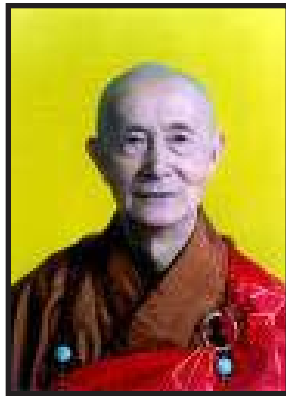


# T R A N S L A T I O N S



*A Rightview Quarterly Feature of Original Translations*



## APPLYING THE DHARMA TO STUDYING BUDDHISM

by Venerable Yin Shun Fashi

Original English  
translation from the  
Chinese by  
Rev. Jenkuan

English language  
and publication  
editing by Xianyang  
Carl Jerome

*While the subject of this essay is tightly focused, in fact, one is simultaneously being advised to use these exact same principles and applications to “studying” any dharma, any phenomena, in one’s daily life.*

*“Applying the Dharma to studying Buddhism” is essential; sometimes I would even say it is utterly essential.* So what does it mean when we say, “Applying the Dharma to studying Buddhism”? Raising the question is relatively easy; answering it is not. I would like to offer my thoughts here. I do not dare to say that my understanding is absolutely right, for my thoughts are only a single drop in the vast ocean of the Dharma. Nonetheless, I offer my understanding as a reference for those who share my belief that we should apply the Dharma to studying Buddhism.

I consider myself as one who applies the Dharma to studying Buddhism. In my opinion, the Buddhism we study should be about all the Buddha taught: the teachings, the truths, the practices, and the results, not only the commonly known pair notions like emptiness-existence, principle-phenomenon, and mind-nature. The teachings refer to the sutras, the vinayas, and the sastras, as well as Buddhist art.

**B**uddhist art is included here because any objects appearing to our six sense faculties can all be the substance of teachings. Like the sutras, these works of art express and elucidate the meanings of Buddhism. The truths refer to all kinds of truths and to the ultimate profound truth. The practices refer to cultivation techniques for individuals, and the rules that guide monastics towards a harmonious sangha. The results refer to the levels of attainment of Sravaka, Pratyekabuddha, and Buddha.

*The Buddhism we study refers to everything the Buddha taught, and the Dharma, qualified here as methodology, refers to the fundamental principles of Buddhism.*

The nature of Dharma, the abiding of Dharma, and the realm of Dharma, as expounded by the Buddha, refer to the authentic Dharma whose nature is spontaneous, stable, and universal. This is the authentic Dharma pervading all places, all times, all phenomena. From something as large as the universe to the small dust particle, each and all are in agreement with the authentic Dharma. It is said that “no phenomenon goes beyond the nature of Dharma” and that “all phenomena are thusness.” This authentic Dharma is the fundamental Dharma and the pervading Dharma of all phenomena. Only when we are in accord with this authentic Dharma and apply it to our study of Buddhism, will our study be regarded as “applying the Dharma to studying Buddhism.” Only then will the methods and results of our study not become twisted nor violate the Buddhadharmas taught by Shakyamuni Buddha.

**What is this authentic Dharma?** Moving from the realm of relativity to that of absoluteness, authentic Dharma refers to emptiness, to suchness, sometimes called “the seal of the one true character.” From a perspective of the expanded realm of all phenomena, authentic Dharma refers to the three Dharma Seals and pertains to

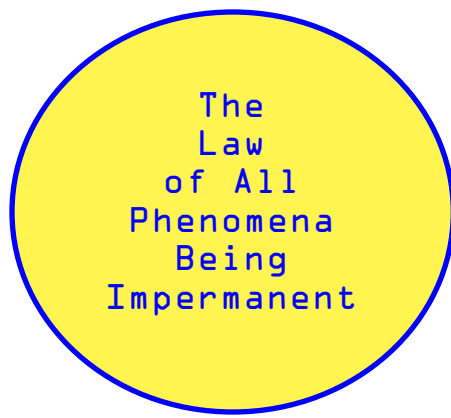
dependently originated phenomena,—namely “all phenomena have the nature of impermanence,” “all phenomena have the nature of no-self,” and “the nature of nirvana is tranquility/cessation.”

**D**ue to the nature of impermanence, if we observe all phenomena vertically (i.e., from the perspective of the temporal continuum), they do not even last for as long as the shortest time or a single thought. They encompass a series of arisings and ceasings among similar phenomena. Due to the nature of no-self, if we observe all phenomena horizontally (i.e., from the perspective of space), they appear to be accumulating and disassociating occurrences that are rotationally interrelated, mutually dependent and complementary. If we perceive all phenomena directly through our senses, they have the Dharma-nature of tranquility/cessation that is without nature and that is neither arising nor ceasing.

**A**s stated in Nagarjuna’s treatise, *The Malamadhyamakakarika*: “The three Dharma Seals are essentially a single Dharma Seal.” If a single Dharma Seal is violated, all three Dharma Seals can no longer stand. This truth must not be diminished. This is what the Buddha expounded: the ultimate Dharma pertaining to all phenomena is also the Dharma pertaining to common phenomena, those manifested in space and time. This is the principle to be held and to be followed while studying Buddhism. In my opinion, only this can be considered “applying the Dharma to studying Buddhism.” Only in this way can we understand Dharma without distorting the Dharma taught by the Buddha and by Buddhism as a whole. In my opinion, when studying the Dharma we should always reflect seriously on whether or not we have really applied this Dharma to studying Buddhism.

**WHAT IS THIS AUTHENTIC DHARMA?**

**MOVING FROM THE REALM OF RELATIVITY TO THAT OF ABSOLUTENESS, AUTHENTIC DHARMA REFERS TO EMPTINESS, TO SUCHNESS; IT IS SOMETIMES CALLED “THE SEAL OF THE ONE TRUE CHARACTER.”**



**FIRST, it must be admitted that Dharma is always in a process of continuous evolution and change.** “Regardless of whether or not a Buddha is vborn in the world, the nature of Dharma always exists within all phenomena.” This is in accord with the constant and universal nature of all phenomena, which is change. Once the nature of Dharma is skillfully spelled out, expressed in scriptures made of words, terms, sentences, and chapters, once it is developed into conceptual theories, then it is handed down as the conventional truth and, as all phenomena are impermanent, it constantly changes. If we view phenomena as “composed,” if we view phenomena as activities, it becomes more clear. This extends to the systems designated for practice and to the Dharma-objects used for explaining Dharma. All are constantly evolving.



The Buddha initially ordained five monks at Deer Park. Few in number, their faculties sharp, the Buddha created only a few simple rules by which they should live. As the number of ordained

**T**welve years after that talk in Deer Park the Buddha gave his first ordination, the monastic precepts were formulated, and the organization of the sangha became stricter and more exacting. Over the years, regulations for the sangha were formulated, adjusted or amended, and even reformulated. After the Buddha entered into nirvana, his disciples split into different sanghas because of different understandings and interpretations of these rules. Some of them started with a strict attitude toward abiding by the regulations and ended up with too great an emphasis on the trivial rules, such as the Sarvastivada sect. Some of them started with a flexible attitude concerning regulations and ended up with being too lax, such as the Mahasamghika sect.

When Buddhism reached China, monastics lived together by observing many although not all the regulations. Later on, temples emphasizing Vinaya took the lead in establishing their own *chanyuan* (meditation divisions), which were further developed in forest temples. In this way, the *qinggui* (pure regulations) formulated by the early Chinese masters gradually emerged. The *qinggui* were formulated differently from time to time and from place to place. Nowadays, there are even sangha groups centered on the study of Buddhist thought that are somewhat different from the sangha groups of the past that were centered on the Vinaya and meditation.

## Impermanence entails both arising and ceasing

followers increased, in order to ensure that they lived together in harmony, to provide guidelines for practice, and to allow them to adapt to natural conditions arising around them, it became necessary to have a significantly greater number of rules than when there were only five disciples.

In short, once Buddhist monastic thinking and regulations became widespread, they could not avoid being dominated by the law of impermanence and change. If we view them as something absolute, or if we hold them as something that could only be adjusted in the

Buddha's time and also as something to be faithfully followed by the later generations and, for this reason, claim that they are always suitable everywhere and always applicable, in whatever place and for hundreds of generations, or if we hold them as something meant to be contemplated and adjusted only by the ancient masters and to be followed by us without question, then we truly violate the Dharma, i.e., the Dharma that the law of all phenomena is impermanent.

Impermanence entails both arising and ceasing. Arising means the arising relative to dependent origination. It is not the arising that comes from the effects formerly existing within causes or

from arising that occurs without any cause. We need to apply dependent origination, which is without permanent nature and which pertains to all phenomena being impermanent, to studying and to understanding arising in Buddhism of a sect, a thought, a practice, or a norm.

Let's take Asanga's Mind-Only theory as an example. If someone says that the Mind-Only theory expounded by Asanga [see below] was already fully and perfectly established during the Buddha's time, and that what Asanga did is merely to hear it from Maitreya and to propagate it without any adjustment, then he is saying tha

### ***Asanga (4th-5th centuries AD)***

#### ***Excerpted from The Philosophy of Mind-Only by Peter Della Santina***

The Mind-Only school is one of the philosophical backbones of the Mahayana tradition. There are several names by which the Mind-Only (sometimes Consciousness-only) school is known, the three most popular being *Chittamatra* (school affirming Mind-Only), *Vijnanavada* (school affirming consciousness), and *Yogachara* (school affirming the unity of meditation and action). *Yogachara* refers to the union of the practice of meditation (yoga) and conduct (*achara*). The Mind-Only school arose as an independent and identifiable philosophical tradition in the fourth to fifth centuries AD—more specific dating than that is not possible.

Asanga, along with his brother Vasubandhu, played a central role in the formulation and popularization of the philosophy of this school. He was born in Northwest India, in what is now Pakistan. Through his writings and skill as a teacher and debater, he popularized the Mind-Only philosophy within a relatively short time.

These two great scholars produced a large number of works defining, categorizing, and setting forth the Mind-Only philosophy. Asanga is famous for his *Stages of the Bodhisattva Path (Bodhisattvabhumi)*, *Compendium of the Abhidharma (Abhidharmasamuchchaya)*, written from the Mahayana or Mind-Only viewpoint, and many commentaries on major works of the Mind-Only school.

Asanga's commentaries to a number of important texts of the Mind-Only school are attributed to Lord Maitreya. Although modern scholars have attempted to identify Maitreya as an historical personality, the attribution clearly meant Maitreya, the future Buddha who resides in the *Tushita Heaven*, and not an historical personality. The major works of the Mind-Only school attributed to Maitreya, and likely by Asanga, include the *Distinction of the Middle from the Extremes (Madhyantavibhaga)* and *The Ornament of the Mahayana (Mahayanasutralankara)*. They are said to have been transmitted by Maitreya to Asanga, who wrote them down and added commentaries.

something already existed in the Buddha's time and re-appeared many centuries later in Asanga's time. This is an erroneous concept of "self-arising" and it is not arising from dependent origination that is in accord with the principle that all phenomena are impermanent.

theory already existed, that is, there were already sentences and chapters which expounded the Mind-Only theory. The stage where Asanga stood came from innumerable and complex evolutions involved with various thoughts and responses to challenges.

**If one's prejudice is too strong, it becomes difficult to properly understand the true meaning of scriptural writings.**



If one says that Asanga's Mind-Only theory did not at all exist during the Buddha's time, but was created by Asanga under Maitreya's name or was directly created by some sect, this is not correct either, but is the erroneous concept of "arising from others." If one says that Asanga's Mind-Only theory exists spontaneously and appears because of the triggering of various sects and the various environmental needs, this still falls into the erroneous concept of "arising combined with self and others," not from dependent origination.

If one says that Asanga's Mind-Only theory exists spontaneously without any cause and condition, this is the erroneous view of "arising without cause."

Then how did Asanga's Mind-Only theory come about or how was it established? It is a developing process relative to dependent origination and dependent establishment, and it is an illusion—a developing process without any permanent nature.

We should first try to understand that Asanga's Mind-Only theory signifies an establishing stage of an evolving process of a theory, when its characteristics and essence were adequately and positively formed. There exists no unchanging self-nature of the Mind-Only theory. The nature of the Mind-Only theory is established during the process of evolution and, even after being established, it is still constantly evolving. During the Buddha's time, the inclination to form the Mind-Only

With regard to cessation relative to the law that all phenomena are impermanent, according to the view of dependent origination, that is, being

empty of permanent nature in all phenomena, cessation signifies neither annihilation nor extinction. It is a kind of phenomena unified with causes and conditions. The same kind of existence as arising If we skip over fact that cessation is one of the dependently originated phenomena, then cessation does not depend on any cause/condition. Therefore in the study of Dharma, one should look into the causes and conditions with regard to the diminishing, extermination, and abolishment of a sect, a thought, or a norm. Cessation is a kind of dependently originated phenomena. Thus, it will have an influence on future events becoming causes and conditions for the arising and ceasing of later thought and norms. Indeed, what has passed has passed; history cannot recur. Yet in dependently originated evolution, historical reality always closely influences future events.

Most modern Buddhist scholars carry out their investigations and studies from an historical perspective. Often the theory of impermanence is not used properly in their investigations, so they frequently come to silly conclusions. Some scholars start their studies sympathizing with the Buddhism of the Buddha's time as they understand it. They herald the Sri Lankan and Thai styles of Buddhism and criticize others. This kind of thinking not only passes over the inevitable evolution, which fluctuates in accordance with the movement of time and space, but also ignores all the efforts and results made by the later generations in their quest to discover the true meaning of Buddhism. The



notion that “what is more ancient is more genuine and more perfect” brings those Sinological scholars to the final step where Confucius adjusted cultural norms by reapplying the ancient authority. Similarly, I think, those poor scholars working on early Indian Buddhism also cannot avoid the fallacy that the Buddha is an achiever in the development of Indian culture.

Some scholars, bewildered by this theory of evolution, maintain that from Hinayana to Mahayana, from the sect of emptiness (i.e., Madhymika) to the Mind-only, and to the Tantrayana, even from Action Tantra to Performance Tantra to the Highest Yoga Tantra, the latter is the more advanced and more perfect. This is an erroneous view. Observing that all phenomena are impermanent, arising and ceasing, the arising and ceasing of the former series and the arising and ceasing of the latter series, that is, the interlocking mutation of the former causes and latter effects, are neither destined evolution nor devolution. No matter the whole Buddhism, or a certain thought, or a certain norm, or a certain practice, they are all the vicissitude phenomena of either improving or declining or maintaining. In each phase, there are still establishments of the new and abolition of the old. It becomes extremely complicated, regardless of whether one looks into each individual sect, thought, norm, etc., or into Buddhism as a whole. Those maintaining “the more ancient the more genuine” pass over the reality that the understanding and practice of Buddhism’s true meaning was often enhanced and glorified. Those maintaining “the more ancient the more perfect” also pass over the aberrant developments and the unhealthy evolutions in later Buddhism. Thus, it is important to apply the Dharma, that is, the law of all phenomena being impermanent, the Buddhist view of evolution, to find the sound development and normal adaptation of the true meaning of Dharma.



**THE LAW of all phenomena being no-self is the center of the dependently originated three Dharma Seals and is pivotal in accomplishing the goals of Buddhist practices.** Let me temporarily put aside the true meanings to be perceived by looking into no-self and explain two ways it should be applied to study. While studying Dharma, one should hold the spirit of no-self. No-self means being separated from the erroneous view of self, the divine self, and not studying or ingesting studies from the notion of self.

In the study of Buddhism, this means to study without being obstinate about any of one’s own prejudices. If one’s subjective prejudice is too strong, it becomes difficult to properly understand the true meaning of scriptural writings. From the Buddhist viewpoint, knowledge comes from and is the result of an interdependent accomplishment between the knower (i.e., that capable of knowing) and the observed objects (i.e. that being known). There is no knowledge that is purely objective and completely separated from the subjective. Moreover, knowledge is constrained by one’s previous learning habits. Only if we can eliminate this prejudice in the process of seeking knowledge, can we arrive at a close understanding of the scriptural meanings.

**There is no knowledge that is purely objective and completely separated from the subjective.**

Sectarianscholarsare usually obstinate about using their own understanding and practices as standards. In their lectures and studies they may disregard the contents of a scripture for its apparent non-conformity to their

**NIRVANA  
SIGNIFIES  
REALITY  
AND  
LIBERATION**

beliefs instead of blindly applying what they have learned to interpret it. It is like taking one's hat off and forcibly trying to put it on another person, assuming it will be a good fit without even looking at the size of the other person's head. If one applies this prejudice to studying Buddhism, erroneous results can be produced all too easily. This application of the law of no-self to the study of Buddhism is not easy to achieve, but we have to pay attention to it and apply it in order to gradually mitigate our personal prejudices.

Chinese Madyamika Master Jiaxiang said, "Once the white lies are swept away, one can then see the real meaning of a scripture." This is indeed a hard-to-obtain "wise saw." When studying a sutra or a sastra, one should never fancy oneself too smart to be prejudiced, nor should one completely rely on the ancient explanations as shown in the commentaries. The best way is to

look for explanation inside the scripture itself and to illuminate the meaning by studying back and forth between the earlier and the later iterations. If one cannot find an exact understanding, then he can refer to other scriptures that conceptually are closely related to this scripture.

For example, when studying the Prajna Sutra, one may want to refer to other sutras, like the Visvacintabrahma Pariprccha Sutra, the Chishi, the Wuxing, and the Aksayamati Sutra, and the commentaries, like the Malamadhyamaka-karika and the Mahaprajnaparamita Sastras. If one cannot understand the teaching, the material can be set aside for a while. Take notes or try to find other references in a leisurely way. One should not give strained interpretations, drawing farfetched analogies to sustain one's own interpretations.

Be aware of those things that are unclear. Allow understanding to develop naturally as knowledge is broadened. This kind of study surpasses mere memorizing, copying, and translation of commentaries. The concept of no-self is

Zhaozhou (Joshu in Japanese) is generally recognized as the greatest Chan master of the Tang Dynasty. He had a profound enlightenment experience when he was eighteen, which indicated to him that there was a Path worth pursuing. Enlightenment was, for him, not an end but simply a step on a Path. So after forty years of training with Nanchuan, his enlightenment master, he wandered in China until he was into his eighties seeking other Chan masters from whom he could learn. At a very old age, he finally settled into Zhaozhou Guanyinyuan Temple, gathering pupils around him. He instructed gently and quietly, but in very sharp and short ways, teaching his own distinctive version of Chan. The following story illustrates his teaching style, which was often couched in direct and paradoxical language:

Once a novice at the Temple came to Zhaozhou and asked, "I am a novice; do you have any instructions to give me?"  
Zhaozhou said, "Have you eaten breakfast?"  
The novice answered, "Yes, I have."  
Zhaozhou then said, "If you've finished breakfast, wash your bowl."

In other words, do what is a matter of course as a matter of course.

Twelve cases in *The Blue Cliff Record* and five in *The Gateless Gate* are attributed to Zhaozhou. He is, however, best known for the first koan in *The Gateless Gate*: A monk asked Zhaozhou, "Does a dog have Buddhature or not?" Zhaozhou replied: "Mu."

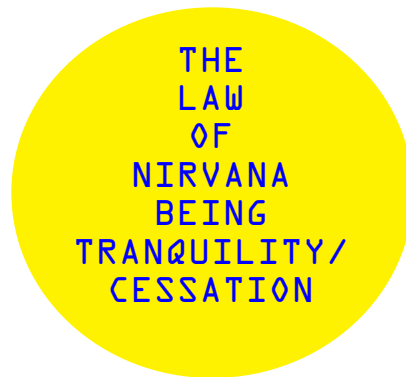
something we frequently talk about and hear about; when studying or handling our daily affairs, we need to at least apply it as well as we can.

*Once again, when studying from the viewpoint of all phenomena having no-self, one understands that there is no independently existing phenomenon in the world. Instead, all phenomena are related to others and, in the process of either mutually absorbing or mutually rejecting, they become the reality of the entire world. Thus, all phenomena are without self and they are only existences unified by the various causes and conditions that are mutually dependent and accomplished. All phenomena are like this. Of course Buddhadharma can not be an exception.*

#### **IT IS a revolving interrelationship.**

This refers not only to an internal relationship in accord with different times, but also to one that is external and closely associated with other scholarship. In the interdependent formation between one and another phenomena that are without self. Moreover, the existences of all phenomena are the unification of various causes and conditions. All phenomena are the unification of various causes and conditions, they, within their seemingly outlook of a whole, in fact contain various natures and functions.

For instance, the Buddha's fundamental teaching, seems to be a unified entity, is extremely profound and diverse. Thus, the various differences should be understood from the perspective of one seemingly-unified entity. The one-taste Dharma, however, cannot be properly understood except from the aspect of the various differences. This signifies that the general aspect and the specific aspect of all phenomena without self are without obstruction. It is also because of this that the reality and the expedient adaptation of the Dharma has been inclined to develop with different focuses during the evolution of Buddhism.



**Nirvana is the final target for all Buddhist practitioners.** Some sutras establish nirvana from the perspective of all activities being impermanent. Thus, it is said that “because there exist arising and ceasing, nirvana (tranquility/cessation) is joyful.” Some establish the meaning of nirvana from the perspective of all phenomena being without self. Thus, it is said that “because there exists the nature of no-self, nirvana is non-arising, non-ceasing, spontaneous cessation, and cessation by its own nature.” There are also scriptural statements explaining nirvana from the perspective that all activities are impermanent, all phenomena are without self, thus illustrating the nature of tranquility/cessation from the perspective of no self.

In brief, nirvana refers to the tranquility/cessation nature of all dependently originated phenomena, the noble objects and the real and unrestricted objects that are perceived by the sentient beings—which is the unification of various conditions in the process of the dependently originated transmigration—who are separated from all the erroneous views and white lies. It is like the rushing up-roaring waves turning into a pond of peaceful spring water. It is like one moving from under the scorching hot summer sun to an autumn night full of cool moonlight, wet dew, and the aroma of cassia in the air. The study of Buddhism is for the achievement of nirvana. It is the real character of all phenomena without our mental contamination. It never separates from us, but we do not realize this.

Not only do investigators of Buddhadharma have to wholeheartedly understand the meanings of the



writings, but they also need to appreciate the impermanent and non-self nature of language and of writings. They should reflect the nature of cessation directly from the writings. In ancient times, many people with great virtue realized the noble object of cessation by reading only one sutra or hearing only one verse—for example, Sariputra heard the verse on the dependent origination, Huineng heard the sentence from the Diamond Sutra “One should detach from all attachments to generate the mind seeking enlightenment,” and so on. They were able to immediately realize the noble object of cessation. “Language by itself is empty of nature and is the character of emancipation.” If one can penetrate this view, study hard, and think properly, when reaching the ripe stage, it will not be difficult for one to attain immediate realization.

Nirvana signifies reality and liberation. Buddhist investigators should take it as the final goal of hard study. Thus, students of Buddhism should have confidence in pursuing the truth and attaining emancipation. The study of Buddhadharma means neither to learn bits and pieces of information for cocktail chatter, nor to equip oneself with credentials for earning fame and fortunes from scholarship, but to realize the truth through one’s own study and practice.

Like Shakyamuni Buddha, who sacrificed all his belongings to pursue the truth, Xuanzang [who became the pre-eminent student of the sixth century scholar-monk Kuiji] traveled to India to pursue Dharma. He went on steadfastly despite the many perils he encountered along the way. Zhaozhou [see page 20] was still traveling around by foot well into his eighties in search of the Dharma. If investigators of Buddhism develop this kind of mind, they will be able to come up with solutions to overcome any difficulty.

Searching for the truth in Buddhism can be carried out while removing all kinds of suffering for oneself and for others. If one pursues the truth merely academically, and does not purify his body and mind, he will maintain his previous patterns of study and work, of interacting with people and attending to life’s various matters. It is obvious that this person does not regard “achieving nirvana” as important, nor does he attempt to perceive the truth and achieve liberation. The study of Buddhadharma should not be like this.

In my opinion, only when one follows the dependently originated three Dharma Seals to study Buddhadharma, that is, following the Seal of One Real Character—all phenomena being empty of self-nature—is one really able to apply the Dharma to studying Buddhadharma. Only by studying this way can one truly catch the spirit of the Dharma in Buddhism.

#### Editor's note:

*In producing this article, we followed Ven. Yinsun Fashi's recommendation to apply the Dharma to understanding the Dharma. We began with a strict, scholarly translation by Rev. Jenkuan. Xianyang Carl Jerome and Xian Huan Hillary Isaacs then smoothed the English text. We avoided translation solutions, like hyphenated and slashed pair wordings (with one exception), which would have made the text difficult to read and understand. Finally we reviewed and revised the article, with consideration given to the nature of the Chinese language in which Master Yinsun wrote, and to the specificities and ambiguities of both Chinese and English in the article. We recognized the boundaries and constraints of the languages and their evolution and departed from there to write a final draft; adding boxed explanatory material rather than modifying the text itself in a significant way when explanatory information seemed necessary. Throughout, we smoothed the language to reflect the character of the Master—a man of deep personal humility with an uncompromising respect for others and a broad, expansively intellectual, open mind.*



## BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MASTER YINSHUN FASHI

Born in 1906, Venerable Yin Shun is considered the greatest Chinese Buddhist intellectual of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As student of Master Tai Xu, the reformer monk of the 1930's who shifted Chinese Buddhism from an insular monastic practice to a humanistic practice, he adopted and disseminated the new Chinese humanistic Buddhism. Briefly, humanistic Buddhism promotes the integration of spiritual practice into all aspects of our daily lives.

Buddhist monastics such as Venerable Masters Sheng Yen and Hsing Yun were deeply influenced by Master Yin Shun's teachings. As part of the reform, Humanistic Buddhism developed a less sectarian view of Buddhist practice and included all of the Buddha's teachings from the time of Gautama Buddha to the present, though shying away from secret and esoteric practices which seemed to fall outside the realm of an equanimous practice. The goal of Humanistic Buddhism is the bodhisattva way, which means to be an energetic, enlightened, and endearing person who strives to help all sentient beings reach liberation. Master Yin Shun is generally seen as the source and greatest supporter of *Tzu-Chi*, the International Buddhist Humanitarian Foundation.