

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

have one life time, and there are no other realms of existence.) I simply don't know. I feel reluctant to take the traditional Buddhist belief for granted. Thus I find those teachings which have an emphasis on that kind of belief not very relevant.

Over the last few days, in order to gather more information for this article I have read quite a few reports about Buddhist monks and nuns. I have been rather shocked to read some of the reports. There are so many scandals around the Buddhist Association on all levels, and in particular concerning some monks in power. The kind of picture I got from reading these reports or rumours circulated online, is that, generally, it is very profitable to run temples, and many people in robes are merely interested in a good position in a temple or the Buddhist Association – particularly in the famous temples – as a means to earn their living, and even make profit. Actually, in Chinese society many people have serious reservations about the Buddhist temples, even from ancient times, and contemporary criticism towards them includes: superstition, corruption, laziness, lack of activity in social work, commercialization of temples, unethical monks (not observing precepts). In a word, one often finds a *business* rather than any higher aspirations, a structure based on power rather than a spiritual community. All this, I found quite saddening and disheartening. However, it is obvious to me that it is not at all the whole picture. I do believe that there are many sincere people trying to revive Buddhism in China, including some senior officials from the government.

Moreover, I think that the revival of various spiritual traditions is only one of a number of reactions to the collapse of the old idealism, and it is not the major one. The majority of people seem to have chosen a much more secular approach: getting a good job, buying a flat, a car, saving money for health and education expenses are primary concerns for the majority. My purpose in studying at university had been to look for the truth and to serve the people. In the year of my graduation (1996), I saw a notice board on campus reporting the result of an investigation into the major concerns of college students: they were 'job' and 'lover'.

I trust that, on the whole, a few generations of Chinese did make sincere efforts to create a strong China with the power to resist western invasions; and, in the last century, to create an ideal world where there would be no exploitation. But we have seen some of these beautiful dreams turning into nightmares. So, it is understandable to me that the 'great reform' initiated in the late 1970s aimed to create a wealthy country by encouraging people to work hard so that they would become rich. Perhaps most people have become more realistic and tired with the old idealism, and they would be frightened by any new Utopia in light of the many political movements seen since the founding of the People's Republic of China. So, the new slogans are "*seek the truth from the facts,*" and "*developing the economy is the focus of our work.*" It seems to me that in our country there is wide-spread sensitivity and scepticism towards so-called spiritual things, whether

spiritual teachers, spiritual authority, spiritual movement, etc. In 2000, a college student working for a master degree in sociology told me that if everyone was looking up to someone, he would take the opposite position even if he also agreed with the person's views. I sense that nowadays many people cherish diversity and autonomy. And not only the government but also many Chinese (perhaps the majority of the Chinese) are sensitive around the issue of mass so-called 'spiritual' movements, especially those which look like cults.

So, while there is a revival of various spiritual traditions, China is very much a secular society. Perhaps today's China is facing its dilemma. We have seen both a bad side of capitalism and a bad side of socialism. Some people have commented that now we have both at the same time. Perhaps this is a bit pessimistic, though. After experiencing a degree of discomfort arising from social reform, some people nowadays have started to miss Chairman Mao's era. Perhaps it reflects the ideas that poor people should be respected and taken care of, and that society should find a way to counteract corruption and the exploitation of weak groups, e.g. building workers from the rural areas. And forgetfulness may also play a major part in this as well. Probably, in retrospect, people tend to glorify the past and forget about the difficulties. In short, I sense that some people are crying out for morality, self-discipline, integrity and justice. And no doubt the government has been trying very hard to meet the demand by promoting '*harmonious society*' and '*eight honours and eight shames*', and by supporting the revival of spiritual traditions, particularly Confucianism and Buddhism. Last year, Master Shengyan from Taiwan was invited to give a talk in Beijing University and Qinghua University, which are the two most famous universities in China. It was quite unusual because religious teachers are rarely invited to give talks in the universities. (More often, they are invited to give talks to students who major in religion.) Even more remarkable is the fact that in March 2006, sponsored by Chinese Buddhist Association and the Religious Culture Communication Association, the first major international Buddhist conference was held in the scenic city of Hangzhou in east China's Zhejiang Province.

According to a report by the Xinhua News Agency, Liu Yandong, vice-chairwoman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), said at the opening ceremony that governments and peoples should make concerted efforts to ensure religions play an active role in building a harmonious world:

"Buddhism has made important contributions to world peace and human civilization in the history. The forum will play a positive role in exploring how Buddhism can contribute to building a harmonious world," Liu said. With the theme of '*a harmonious world begins in the mind*,' the participants focused on three topics: Buddhism's unity and cooperation, its sense of social responsibility, and its peaceful mission to make different nations and religions work for a peaceful, prosperous and harmonious world.

I am deeply pleased by this move on the part of our government. Not only because the government values Buddhism highly, but also because I think that the move reflects the Chinese wish to contribute to the world culturally.

Some Indian friends, after visiting Beijing, told me that they did not like China copying Western culture blindly. While eagerly learning from the West and looking for recognition, respect and acceptance from the international community, many Chinese certainly do not want to lose self-respect, and many Chinese do have reservations about certain aspects of Western culture.

It will be psychologically healthy if we Chinese find that we have a lot to contribute to the world on a cultural level. The same Taiwanese friend, who was also studying political science, asked me eagerly and repeatedly, “tell me something positive about Chinese culture and Chinese people”. We Chinese became very self-critical after our defeat in the Opium War in 1840. And, as you know, the so-called Cultural Revolution was a movement of denying traditional values, i.e. one of the many movements aimed at undermining the values of traditional teachings. So, while crying out for morality, self-discipline, integrity and justice, I suppose many Chinese also turn to the traditional teachings to look for inspirations and self-respect at being Chinese, and would like to contribute to the world by connecting with the old traditions.

So, to put it in another way, I think that some people regard the revival of Buddhism and Confucianism as part of the revival of China itself, of Chinese culture.

When I met Suvajra and Subhuti in Pune last December, I felt very inspired by their willingness to contribute to the revival of Buddhism in China. And I trust that the FWBO's approach will speak to many Chinese who may have many reservations about the existing forms of Buddhism that seem to insist on the monastic sangha's superiority over lay Buddhists, as well as on the formal acceptance of a set of core beliefs (like rebirth or certain interpretations of Karma) before one will be recognized as a Buddhist. If Buddhism is conveyed as a way to facilitate personal growth (in awareness, compassion, and wisdom), with an emphasis on spiritual friendship rather than on the teacher-disciple relationship; if a more outgoing character (social work or engaged Buddhism) is promoted, and Buddhism is regarded as a means rather than as an end, it might speak to many people who find the existing forms of Buddhism unconvincing. And some Chinese Buddhists might be interested in exploring the FWBO's approach. Actually, a few years ago, in an issue of *'Sound of the Dharma'*, the magazine published by the Chinese Buddhist Association, there was a long article introducing the 'right livelihood businesses' of the FWBO in a very positive way.

So I believe that the development of Buddhism in the West in general can also contribute to the revival of Buddhism in China. It uses modern language to explain Buddhism to people who have little idea about what it is; its teachings are designed to be practised in a modern society; it looks back to the Buddha and to eminent Buddhist teachers in history for its inspiration, including some teachers from China. And there are already some Buddhist works that have now been translated from English into Chinese. The most influential one at the moment, perhaps, is *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche.

Ruan Yinhua is the Chinese translator for

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