



Does Buddhism Offer Holistic Ecological Discourse? — The Case of Tzu Chi in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT:

Many Buddhists or scholars promote Buddhism as holistically ecological. This view is popular and unquestioned for a long time so much so that there are terms such as ‘eco-Buddhism’ or ‘green Buddhism’. However, since the late twentieth century, this view has been challenged. Some scholars question whether Buddhism offer holistic and genuine discourse on ecology or it is a product of Buddhist apologists. This paper will use the case study of a Buddhist organization in Taiwan- Tzu Chi, to reflect on this debate. It will examine Tzu Chi’s environmental protection works through the standpoint of Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory. By so doing, I hope to offer a new perspective on the relationship between Buddhism and ecological discourse.

Keywords: Buddhist ecology, Niklas Luhmann, Tzu Chi, eco-religious communication

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This article is the second report on a Research Project of the Ministry of Science and Technology.
The project number is NSC 101-2632-H-364-001-MY3. The execution of this project is during
August 1, 2012 until July 31, 2015.

佛教能否提供整體生態論述？

——以台灣的慈濟為例

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摘要

許多佛教徒或者學者將佛教視為對生態友善的宗教，能為生態提供全方位的論述，甚至有了『生態佛教』等名詞。然而在二十世紀末以來，有些學者提出不同意見，認為生態佛教不過是佛教護教者的產物，佛教本身並不具有生態保護的傳統。本文將採用盧曼的系統理論觀點，檢視台灣佛教團體慈濟的環保工作，以期能對佛教與生態之間的關係提供新的論點。

關鍵字：佛教生態學、盧曼、慈濟、宗教生態溝通

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本文係科技部整合型研究計畫《台灣環境倫理與動物倫理之佛教論述、影響與前瞻》之第二期報告。該項計畫編號為 NSC 101-2632-H-364-001-MY3。本計畫執行期間自民國 101 年 08 月 01 日起至 104 年 07 月 31 日止。

There has been a debate on whether Buddhism is holistically ecological (Holder 2007). By applying NiklasLuhmann's systems theory to a Taiwanese Buddhist group — Tzu Chi, this paper wishes to offer a different perspective on this debate.

1. Eco-Religious Communication

The first point in the debate is whether ecological elements can be found in Buddhist tradition. Among the eight missions listed on Tzu Chi's official website is "Environmental Protection". At the first glance, it seems to confirm the genuineness of Buddhist ecology. For example, there is an online Tzu Chi article titled, "Change Bad Environmental Karma".¹ The beginning of the article cites the story of an encounter between the Buddha and an elderly fisherman. The article criticizes the fisherman for concerning only his and his son's suffering while turning a blind eye to the suffering of the fishes. The article concludes that,

The destruction of the environment on earth causes climate change and the decline of food production. This is the collective karma of all sentient beings. How can we change this collective karma? We must begin with changing human mind, by doing no evil and doing only good....²

Buddhist elements such as karma, suffering, purifying mind, etc. are evoked. It seems to endorse Buddhist ecology.

The problem is that concerns for environmental protection did not occur to Master Cheng Yen until 1990. In August that year Master Cheng Yen was invited to give a speech in Taichung City. On her way to the venue, she passed a night market and saw trashes scattered throughout the streets. A sense of sorrow arose in her heart. When the speech ended later that evening, she told the audience,

...using your clapping hands to sort out garbage and realize the work of recycling.

¹ "GaibianHuanjingErye", http://tw.tzuchi.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1023%3A2009-07-09-01-12-38&catid=136%3A2009-07-02-10-06-05&Itemid=519&lang=zh. Accessed on 2 February 2014. My translation.

² *Ibid.* My translation.

*Building Pure Land on earth is what I'd hope for.*³

This incident supposedly launched Tzu Chi's Environmental Protection mission. It is significant that the year should be 1990. According to Chen Yueh-fong, 1980s was the time when environmental concerns began to gain public attention in Taiwan (2011, 19-20), so Tzu Chi's launch of Environmental Protection mission reflects social sentiment of the time. Indeed, ecology as a social theme in human communication was absent throughout much part of history,

Compared to the history of reflection on humanity and society this theme—ecology — is not very old. Only in the last twenty years has one seen a rapidly increasing discussion of the ecological conditions of social life and the connection between the social system and its environment But only today has it reached an intensity that obtrudes as a 'noise' distorting human communication that can no longer be ignored (Luhmann 1986, 1).

Since eco-religious communication is a very recent phenomenon, “[u]sually we have to read modern ecological concepts and problems into the historical material in order to retrieve relevant information” (Günzel 2013, 78). The application of religious sources for ecological discourse is thus a contemporary attempt. Tellingly, while some contemporary scholars debate on the question whether Buddhism offers ecological inspiration, others contemplate the Pāli term for the English word “nature” (Upali 2008). If the very Pāli equivalent for the English word “nature” has to be thought for, it implies a very different worldview behind the writing or redacting of Buddhist Pāli canons from the contemporary cultural context.

Another example is vegetarianism that Tzu Chi promotes as part of its Environmental Protection mission. Although vegetarianism has been a norm in Chinese Buddhism for centuries (Harvey 2000, 164), Tzu Chi bestows it with a new perspective. A Tzu Chi article cites a 2006 report by UN's Food and Agriculture Organization to highlight the

³ “CijiHuanbaoYuanqi”, <http://www.tzuchi.net/aas.nsf/4d8e11ee4d310d784825719a00355c79/e1274fafb4f7fd9f4825734a00131f13?OpenDocument>. Accessed on 2 February 2014. My translation.

environmental damage caused by the meat industry. It concludes by saying,

*We need to take immediate action to reduce and reverse the damage inflicted on Mother Nature. By reducing meat consumption and converting to a vegetarian diet, we can create a sustainable environment meanwhile reducing world hunger!*⁴

Since the scale of meat industry was not as extensive in pre-modern society as it is now, the association of vegetarianism with environmental ethics is evidently motivated by contemporary ecological crisis.

2. To Purify One's Mind

In the debate on Buddhism and ecology, one question is often raised—does Buddhism offer genuinely Buddhist discourse on ecology? Seeing from Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, the argument is redundant. For Luhmann, religious discourse on ecology is at best inadequate partly because of religion's inability to accept science and technology (1986, 94-99). Theoretically then, the debate on genuineness of Buddhist ecology is pointless since *no* religion can claim a genuine and adequate relationship with ecology. But religion as communication (Günzel 2013, 79-80) functions in a self-referential operative network and understood "according to its own universe of meaning" (Günzel 2013, 81). That is, however ecologically inadequate eco-religious communication may be, it is still meaningful within the religious subsystem.

For Joanna Macy, it is the Buddhist concept of dependent co-arising (*patīccasamupāda*) that makes Buddhism ecological⁵, and John Holder suggests morality (2007). Based on Tzu Chi's website and publications, the environmental ethics promoted at Tzu Chi might be summarized into one verse, "to purify one's mind."

For example, Master Cheng Yen says,

⁴ "Combats Global Warming", http://tw.tzuchi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=682%3Acombats-global-warming-&catid=62%3Aenvironmentalprotection&Itemid=186&lang=en. Accessed on 4 February 2014.

⁵ Interestingly, Macy uses general systems theory to make this point. See Macy, Joanna (1991). *Mutual causality in Buddhism and general systems theory: the dharma of natural systems*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

*Human mind is like heaven and earth, so there are occasions when the four elements of earth, water, fire and air go off balance We need to keep a good maintenance of our mind as well as good conservation of it, so that we can avoid landslide within. I often say, "Walk gentle, so the earth won't feel hurt". If we are concerned with how our steps might hurt the earth, we certainly should be mindful of not hurting others' mind*⁶

*The only way to prevent natural disaster is to harmonize human mind, and by overcoming the disaster within human mind (C. Shih 2010, 87).*⁷

In the statements above, human mind and ecological conservation are effectively linked.

To purify the mind, one is urged to reduce desire. Master Cheng Yen teaches,

*Our efforts to fulfill our desires bring us much affliction. If we want to get rid of our afflictions, we have to know their source — our desire.*⁸

*Disasters are the nature's lessons to humankind. One must be alarmed, look into oneself deeply and then repent — how in the past, one has been senselessly driven by desires, only to chase after material and sensual indulgence. As the result, one committed all kinds of bad karma. Those selfish and harmful ways must be changed. One must begin anew, to have less desire, to be more disciplined, and to live industriously and thriftily.*⁹

⁶ "Xindi de ShuituBaochi", <http://www.tzuchi.net/aas.nsf/4d8e11ee4d310d784825719a00355c79/50e02daa0abd62884825734a00131f0d?OpenDocument>. Accessed on 2 February 2014. My translation.

⁷ My translation.

⁸ "The Joy of Being Content", http://tw.tzuchi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=897%3Athe-joy-of-being-content&catid=115%3Aspiritual-practice&Itemid=323&lang=en. Accessed on 5 February 2014.

⁹ "Manzuzhidao — keji,keqin,kejian,Kenan", http://tw.tzuchi.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=395%3A2009-01-21-07-21-05&catid=136%3A2009-07-02-10-06-05&Itemid=519&lang=zh. Accessed on 5 February 2014. My translation.

That's not all. A mind that cultivates love and wholesomeness is encouraged.

*Let's unit with love and radiate wholesomeness to compass the globe in order to nourish the earth and purify human mind.*¹⁰

*... Only by cultivating the mind with wholesome roots and disseminating the seeds of wholesomeness, then we may harvest blessings and elude misfortunate (C. Shih 2010, 92).*¹¹

*Saving the world begins with saving the mind. Everyone has love in heart. But if one can be wholesome, he/she can also be unwholesome. Wholesomeness and unwholesomeness play a tug of war in everyone's mind. If wholesomeness and love can be stronger within the mind, covetous thoughts can be overcome.*¹²

In short, Tzu Chi's environmental ethics emphasize the virtue of mind, in the way that only through a purified and wholesome mind the environmental protection might be possible. It corresponds to a famous verse in *The Dhammapada*,

To cease from all evil, to cultivate good, to purify one's mind. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas (The Dhammapada, Verse: 183).

That is, the emphasis on mind testifies to Tzu Chi's Buddhist Foundation on its Environmental Protection mission.

Niklas Luhmann's systems theory may see this discourse on ecology inadequate because religion, *all religion*, dependent on an antecedent social awareness of ecological problem that is first uttered by science and technology (1986, 98). For Luhmann's systems theory implies that,

¹⁰ "DaaiQingliuraoQuanqiu", <http://www.tzuchi.net/aas.nsf/4d8e11ee4d310d784825719a00355c79/761ccb02fee2495d482573fb0015b530?OpenDocument>. Accessed on 5 February 2014. My translation.

¹¹ My translation.

¹² "YaocongJiuxinKaishi", <http://www.tzuchi.net/aas.nsf/4d8e11ee4d310d784825719a00355c79/d4bd4315c92ee824482573520008c1c2?OpenDocument>. Accessed on 5 February 2014. My translation.

Eco-religious communication that is genuinely religious is guided by the code of religion and the programs of particular traditions and therefore primarily fulfills the function of religion. It does not serve ecological purposes (Günzel 2013, 82).

3. Becoming Bodhisattva

The most significant achievement of Tzu Chi's Environmental Protection mission appears to be garbage recycling. Under the encouragement of Master Cheng Yen, recycling stations are set up to collect and sort out recyclable garbage. By 2008, Tzu Chi could boast more than 5,000 recycling stations and more than 72,000 certified recycling volunteers in Taiwan, and estimated 735 recycling stations and 8,800 recycling volunteers in other countries (Shih and Tsai 2012, 74). Recycled plastics are reported to be re-manufactured into Eco-green blankets and clothes and are subsequently distributed in other charity missions.¹³ Tzu Chi's recycling message seems to have affected on the whole country: the amount of recycled garbage in Taiwan has increased from 584,333 metric tons in 2001 to 3,167,656 metric tons in 2012 (Huanjing Tongji Yuebao, R.O.C., No. 301 中華民國環境統計月報 2013). Although it cannot be known for certain the degree of Tzu Chi's influence on Taiwanese's recycling habits¹⁴, the achievement is still remarkable.

According to Niklas Luhmann, a successful communication requires three elements, language as a medium, the transmission media (such as writing, printing, TV, internet) and the symbolically generalized media, such as money, power, love, law, truth (Ronc'evic' and Makarovic' 2010, 225). If one may boldly apply Luhmann's theory to account for Tzu Chi's success in recycling works, one may point to Master Cheng Yen's teachings and Tzu Chi media.

¹³ "Global Company Certifies Tzu Chi Recycled Goods as 'Green' Gold", http://tw.tzuchi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=736%3Aglobal-company-certifies-tzu-chi-recycled-goods-as-green-gold&catid=62%3Aenvironmentalprotection&Itemid=186&lang=en. Accessed on 6 February 2014.

¹⁴ The increased amount of recycled garbage coincided the general growth of ecological awareness in Taiwan.

Master Cheng Yen has been widely acknowledged as a charismatic and effective orator who uses very simple language to charm and deeply move the audience (Huang 2009). Tzu Chi owns a wide variety of media such as TV stations, internet and publishing houses; all transmit Master Cheng Yen's teachings as well as recycling information to the global wide audience. Those two elements combine together can reach to a wide range of potential receipts of Tzu Chi's eco-message.

In Tzu Chi, conducting Environmental Protection mission is more than to "go green"—it is a form of spiritual practice. For example, Master Cheng Yen teaches:

These volunteers are the guardian bodhisattvas of the earth, mending the wounds that Mother Nature received from humanity's insatiable greed (quoted in Shih and Tsai 2012, 74).

Moreover, she associates recycling stations to temples:

Recycling Stations are like temples. In each [recycling station], people can participate in spiritual practice together. Besides learning Environmental Protection knowledge, one can learn how to be good, how to do good, how to educate others' mind and how to be the earth and life's V.I.P. (C. Shih 2010, 212).¹⁵

And,

A recycling station is a wondrous temple for the mind. Its outer energy can save the earth and inner energy can purify human mind (C. Shih 2010, 235).¹⁶

Tzu Chi volunteers are affectionately called 'bodhisattva' and publicly complimented so by Master Cheng Yen (Shih and Tsai 2012, 74). Advert for recruiting volunteers in Tzu Chi's website titled, "Recruit Bodhisattva in the Human Realm."¹⁷ When Tzu Chi media publish stories of its volunteers, the volunteers are usually called 'bodhisattva'. The usage

¹⁵ My translation.

¹⁶ My translation.

¹⁷ "ZhigongZhaomu—renjianpusa da zhaosheng", http://tw.tzuchi.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=232&Itemid=284&lang=zh. Accessed on 6 February 2014. My translation.

of the label 'bodhisattva' is significant since in Buddhism, a bodhisattva is the embodiment of compassion. By calling its volunteers bodhisattvas is to imply that the volunteers are walking on the bodhisattva path. That is, engaging in spiritual practice.

Turning the laborious works of recycling garbage into spiritual practice, Tzu Chi synthesizes Buddhism with ecological discourse. In a cultural context (i.e. Taiwan) where Buddhist elements are disseminated extensively and penetrate into almost every aspect of social/cultural life, Tzu Chi's eco-Buddhist communication proves to be popular and successful.

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