

***Chinese Buddhist Monk's Autobiography as Model of Living: Master Yin Shun's  
Active and Passive Following of the "Flow"***

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**Abstract**

Autobiography, a self-written narrative normally documenting one's own life, seems to work on a concept of self that is contradictory to one of the core Buddhist beliefs: the "self" is an illusion. It is therefore interesting to examine and review an example of a Buddhist monk's autobiography, to analyze how the concept of the self is represented, and further to explore the role such a narrative is made to play in the context of contemporary Buddhist teachings. Master Yin Shun (1906-2005) was a well-known Buddhist scholar-monk in the Mahayana tradition. Besides his contributions to modern interpretations of some key Buddhist doctrines, he also advocated "Humanistic" Buddhism, which inspired a number of prominent contemporary Buddhist monastics, such as Sheng-yen of Dharma Drum Mountain and Xing-yun of Fo Guang Shan, who are active in humanitarian aid, social work, environmentalism and academic research as well. His advocating of a socially engaged Buddhism also resulted in the establishment of a Tzu-Chi Buddhist Foundation, an important charity foundation based in Taiwan. Master Yin Shun's autobiography was written in three stages, marking three points of major illness in his life. His personal narrative was written in the form of a direct address to the readers, and sharing Buddhist teachings directly and indirectly using his own life as an example of the manifestation of the Dharma. The presentation will focus on how Master Yin Shun makes use of this "self-centred" genre to advocate his ideal of Humanistic Buddhism, to suit the practical needs of contemporary Buddhists.

Keywords: monastics autobiography; humanistic Buddhism; *yin-yuan*/causes and conditions; reader rapport

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## **Introduction**

### **Master Yin Shun and Humanistic Buddhism**

Master Yin Shun (1906-2005) was a well-known Chinese Buddhist scholar-monk in the Mahayana tradition. He has made important contributions to Buddhism in a modern Chinese context in terms of his advocating a “Humanistic Buddhism” (Ren Jian Fo Jiao), which is, very briefly a Buddhism that is situated at the human realm. His approach to Buddhism involves a modern interpretation of some key Buddhist doctrines for the ordinary people, as well as engagement in humanistic acts to practice Buddhism in daily life situations. This down-to-earth approach has inspired a number of prominent contemporary Chinese Buddhist monastics, such as Sheng-yen (1931-2009) of Dharma Drum Mountain and Xing-yun (1927- ) of Fo Guang Shan, both based in Taiwan, who have been active in humanitarian aid, social work, environmentalism and academic research as well. Master Yin Shun’s promotion of a socially engaged Buddhism also resulted in the establishment of a Tzu-Chi Buddhist Foundation, an important charity foundation based in Taiwan.

Humanistic Buddhism is an approach started by Master Taixu. Very briefly, it “emphasizes rationality, with less emphasis on the sacred. For the attainment of ultimate goal, it emphasizes rational ways, with a demotion of mystical religious experience and obscuring of divine power” (An, 23). Moreover, this approach “focuses on *this* life, the improvement of *this* imperfect world” (An, 24). Master Yin Shun has devoted his long life to the spreading of Buddhist teachings in various ways. He engaged followers in talks and seminars, he had a long list of publications, he facilitated the building and establishment of a number of Buddhist abode (a compound with lecture halls and residential area for Buddhist monks to study and to spread the teachings of Buddha), and he inspired the founding of socially engaged Buddhist organisations. In this presentation, I am referring to his autobiography, entitled *An Ordinary Life*, to discuss how this literary genre is used in his case as another tool to spread Buddhist teachings.

### **Autobiography as a literary genre: a promise**

Understood in a conventional way, an autobiography is a narrative with a continuous form, with a beginning, development and a conclusion. This narrative is usually delivered by the voice of a single narrator, namely the main “character” of the text, the person who is supposed to have lived through the experiences documented in the narrative. Because of this special content, readers will also expect to get the most reliable and firsthand information about this “person” from the narrator, as after all the person himself or herself is expected to be the one with the most intimate and reliable information in this case. Therefore, an autobiography is conventionally expected to be an authentic narrative from the most reliable source. However, one must also remember that the autobiography is a literary genre, meaning that as a piece of writing, it has been traditionally used to serve a particular purpose, probably also following a particular structure, although any writer embarking on such a project may choose to have a dialogue with the tradition.

The autobiography/autobiographical is a well-established subject of study, with a rich body of literature about the numerous forms it takes and the interesting variations among these forms. I refer to Philippe Lejeune's concept of the autobiographical pact in my reading of Master Yin Shun's self-narrative, as authenticity and identity among the various "selves" of the autobiography is of particular importance in the reading of the text as a model of living. Very simply, Lejeune describes the autobiography as "the retrospective record in prose that a real person gives of his or her own being, emphasizing the personal life and in particular the 'story of life'. In characterizing this kind of writing, he writes "In order to create an autobiography, the author enters into a pact or contract with the readers, promising to give a detailed account of his or her life, and of nothing but that life." In other words, the distinguishing features of an autobiography, according to Lejeune, are introspection, and a claim for truth. Having said that, he also recognizes inevitable human factors (deficient memory, intention to exaggerate etc.) that will prevent the author from fully delivering such an authentic record of the past.

When I say the identity of the various "selves" in the autobiography, I am referring to the relationship among the multiple "selves" that are involved in the writing of the narrative. First of all there is the writing self, the one who is the mature person, usually at a later stage in life, and looking back on a series of events in his/her life. This person has all the information of the life to be recorded, and thus is making a choice about what to include and what not to include in this narrative. The criteria of choice depend on the intended purpose of the work. Then there is the subject (the person) who had actually lived the life through the decades, whose experiences are to be selected and recorded in the present narrative. There is also the "remembered self" and stories, which may not necessarily be the same as the "subject" who had lived through the experiences. (For that matter, one might even say that everyday the self is different, and in the duration of the writing of the autobiography, many selves have already arisen and died.) Here we can see the complex layering of "selves" in the autobiographical narrative. Are these three selves the same person? If we see the construction of an autobiography as entering into a pact with the readers, then we may say that Master Yin Shun, by calling this narrative his autobiography, has promised his readers that these three selves are the same person.

### **Master Yin Shun's promise as a model of living**

In my proposed reading of Master Yin Shun's autobiography as a tool to spread the teachings of Buddha, this promise is to be taken seriously, as identity among the various "selves" and the claim of truth of all that is recorded are both essential to this function. Master Yin Shun's promotion of Humanistic Buddhism (Human-Centred Buddhism) requires his demonstration of Buddhism as learnings that can be and should be realized in an average person's daily life. His own life story is the example that shows how these teachings have been realized. In the following, I will discuss selected chapters with the aim of showing how this Chinese monastic's autobiography is designed to promote Humanistic Buddhism in a number of ways; not only the content, but also the way the narrative voice interacts with the readers.

Bhiksu Changtzu clarifies the meaning of Humanistic Buddhism in the book *Introducing Venerable Yin Shun to the West* (2017) to show that this term, originally in Chinese, means "to practice Buddhism with humans as the core focus, while

encompassing all that relates to humans as well, such as family, friends, society and even the environment” (Bhiksu Changtzu, 21). The context of using this term was during the 1940s and 50s Chinese society, he was much concerned by the contrast between what he saw as the intention of Buddha’s teaching and the actual Buddhist practices in China then, which was mainly chanting at funeral services, and some forms of Pureland Practices. People pray for wellbeing and good fortune when they visit temples, but Buddhism had no place in their normal daily life. His intention of bringing Buddhism and Buddhist practices to the daily life of ordinary people was much encouraged when he came across a text in the *Ekottaragama* in Chinese which reads “All Buddhas appear in the human realm, never has one become a Buddha in a heaven” (24). This became his approach to revitalize Buddhism in the Human Realm.

Bhiksu Changtzu further elaborates on the three purposes of Humanistic Buddhism, or Renjian Fojiao. They are:

1. To bring Buddhism to the people;
2. To encourage people to perfect the three unique human qualities of recollection, diligence, and morality which will enable them to practice dharma and be on the way to Buddhahood; and
3. To promote the cultivation of self-purification by continually acting to benefit others

In the following, we shall see how Master Yin Shun’s autobiography has attempted to achieve these purposes.

### **Title and Tone of the Text**

The title of the autobiography sets the tone of this textual communication with the readers – *An Ordinary Life* – as an interaction with equals. Most of the published autobiographies are written by people who do not lead an ordinary life – successful businessmen, sports celebrities, politicians, someone who has a great impact on the life of many people. Here, although the life being recorded is nothing ordinary, the choice of this title is much in line with his advocacy of humanistic Buddhism, encouraging lay readers to adopt Buddhist teachings as principles of life in their own daily practices.

This “approachable” and “easy-going” tone is well explained in the first chapter of the autobiography: “the most memorable in this life is yin-yuan” (causes and conditions). The opening sentence of this edition is voiced by the mature writer (93-year-old master Yin Shun), looking back on his long life, and also at his dedication to Buddhism for more than 6 decades. He defines his “ordinariness” as having no impact on political and state affairs, no impact on Buddhism’s popularity, nor any impact in saving or destroying human lives. He even goes so far as to claim that his life is so ordinary that it is a blank page. A blank page it certainly is not, for the narrative then continues for more than 200 pages.

In this first chapter, the overriding theme that links the 200 pages of events in his life is introduced, that of “yin-yuan” (causes and conditions). His eventful and long life is ordinary because it is the normal result of the complex operation of causes and conditions. Causes and conditions – or the law of dependent origination – is considered in Buddhism as the basic law of all phenomena in the world. Seen this way, no matter how dramatic or extraordinary things and events are, there is no need

to be shocked, because it is only the natural result of things happening under the influence of causes and conditions. To understand the changeability of all phenomena is one of the most essential lessons to learn in Buddhism, this will nurture in us the correct attitude to face the various situations in life when they arise and cease.

### **Yin-Yuan /Causes and Conditions creating Ordinarity**

Throughout the narrative, the overarching theme of yin-yuan is recalled repeatedly in the description of the content of his life. Of the 35 chapters which refer to different episodes of his life, for example, 7 chapter headings contain the term yin-yuan, or simply yuan. The following will be a simple discussion of these chapters.

1. Chapter 7: The unended karmic conditions and the difficulty of dying [業緣未了 死何難]

This chapter contains a list of 6 experiences of near-deaths from illnesses throughout his life, up to the time when he was 62 years old. The point of the list is, first of all, to describe his weak health since a young age, but also more importantly the mental quality he has nurtured as a result of this physical condition. At the end of the chapter, he noted that he used to say that “with such a weak health, even a small push of a condition will cause death” (P. 34). But at the point of writing, looking at the long list of near-death illnesses, he suddenly realized that with the karmic conditions still active and on-going, it is not really that easy to see the end of life. The “lesson” that he has learned from a recounting of his poor health and the big illnesses he had suffered, was that “yin-yuan is unimaginable” (P. 35), if the karmic conditions is still on-going, death is almost impossible; whereas if the karmic conditions have come to an end, death will be inescapable.

2. Chapter 12: Hong Kong does not have a karmic connection with me [香港與我無緣]

This chapter refers specially to his plan of raising money to build a Buddhist abode [精舍] in Hong Kong when he arrived in 1949 June. He subsequently raised enough money, even bought a piece of land, but the plan never materialized because of unexpected circumstances. He was invited to represent the Chinese Buddhist society to attend a conference in Japan, which he did, and on his return to Taiwan he discovered that he had not applied for a visa to leave Taiwan. He was told that if he wanted to leave, he had to apply for residency in Taiwan in the first place. So he followed people’s advice, and still ended up waiting for the permit that did not come. With no prospect of going to Hong Kong, he had to spend the money collected for the purpose of building a place for the monastics to live and study together. Finally someone introduced him to a nice place in Xinzhu [新竹], and the Buddhist abode [精舍] was built in Xinzhu with the money collected from Hong Kong followers. He concluded this chapter by saying that in this life, he always followed the flow of the causes and conditions without complaint, and in this case, the causes and conditions seemed to work together to make him stay in Taiwan and not Hong Kong, which he accepted although it was not his original plan.

3. Chapter 18: Yin-yuan related to constructions/buildings [有關建築的因緣]  
After a few chapters about his experience of being misunderstood by different people, and being accused of allying with Japanese power groups and even Mainland Communist groups, in chapter 18 he moved on to further discuss his experience with building Buddhist establishments in his life. On reflection, he had been involved in the construction of 5 Buddhist establishments. When he referred to the repeated process of finding a location, raising the money, supervising the construction, he realized that in these events, yin-yuan always has a part. He talked about the pleasant surprises when things happened coincidentally in the way that favoured his building plans, the chances of meeting good people who supported his plans, and meeting good construction supervisors and so on. On the success of these 5 establishments, he commented that although some people congratulated him on his plentiful merits, he personally thought that his life was full of struggles, and could not be regarded as having merits. Instead, the success of building these Buddhist establishments merely meant that in his previous lives, he must have accumulated some good karma from good relationships with people, and that he had been inspired by the Dharma in his previous lives (P. 106).
  
4. Chapter 24: Good karmic connections with good women [有緣的善女人]  
In this chapter he named and told the stories of a number of good women that he had encountered, who were devoted to and supportive of Buddhism. The personal stories of these good women were different, some started with great devotion right at the beginning, and some started lukewarm with a will only to learn some Buddhist knowledge. Despite the differences of their route to Buddhism, in each of their cases something very special (both positive and negative) had happened to them, to give them the confidence in following the Dharma, and spending time and money to help other people follow the Dharma as well. Master Yin Shun devoted a chapter simply to talk about these 3 good women to show that yin-yuan is a law that applies to all, despite differences among people.
  
5. Chapter 27: The privileged yin-yuan with publications [出版的殊勝因緣]  
This chapter is almost like a bibliography list of Master Yin Shun's main publications. This chapter also marks the beginning of the second edition of the autobiography, published when he was 88 years old, adding 6 more chapters to the first edition which was published in 1971 when he was 66 years old.<sup>1</sup> Theoretically, the narrative voice at this point is not exactly the same as the one which had guided the readers through the first 26 chapters. The point of this chapter, as suggested at the beginning, is to acknowledge the help he had been given throughout his life by others in getting his writings published. At the end of this long chapter (P. 171-186), he wrote: "I wish to present the publication of these books to repay the great blessings bestowed [on me] by the three jewels" (P. 186). He thanked the people who helped him, because ultimately it is the Buddhist teachings that is being publicized by these books.

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<sup>1</sup> These were the times when the master was 66 years old (1971, 26 chapters, 68000 words), 88 years old (1993, 32 chapters, 90000 words), and when the master was 93 years old (1998, 35 chapters).

This chapter is rather unusual in the sense that the information can be much better presented in the form of a list or a table, to be attached at the end for the readers' reference, had the intention been simply to share the list. It also did not make sense to say that it was Master Yin Shun's pride which drove him to include a list of his writings in the narrative of his autobiography. He wrote these books to spread Buddhist teachings to ordinary people, and the autobiography is just another of these tools to achieve the same purpose. Interestingly this personal narrative is an attempt to achieve a most impersonal goal.

6. Chapter 28: The yin-yuan with spreading the Precepts [傳戒因緣]

This chapter continues with a similar structure as the previous one, presenting the main content of the chapter in the form of a list. Here it is a list of ceremonies that he had either hosted or assisted in order to teach the precepts. Although the list of ceremonies he had attended was not particularly impressive, it seems to serve the same purpose as the previous chapter about his own writing. Here it is yet another channel of learning about Buddhism and its practices. Master Yin Shun in different chapters had described himself to be a pliable person, without very strong feelings about anything, and had learned the importance of following the flow of causes and conditions. The very last sentence of this chapter, "in my life, participating in ceremonies of the precepts is merely a matter of rejoicing their presence" (P. 192). Again the person and his actions are not driven by the "self" (or ego), it is simply following the natural flow, or being part of the natural flow of causes and conditions.

## Conclusion

Bhiksu Changtzu described Master Yin Shun as a quiet and unassertive person, he wrote "his motto was to just flow with the current of causes and conditions. Rarely did he actively pursue something, apart from his studies" (Bhiksu Changtzu, p. 55). These seven chapters in his autobiography with a title that contains the words yin-yuan or yuan, meaning the causes and conditions that lead to all the physical and mental phenomena in our world, have adequately demonstrated his tendency to flow with the causes and conditions throughout his life. I would like to suggest that although Master Yin Shun's "flow" with the causes and conditions sound like a passive following of the circumstances, in fact his following the flow embodies an active endeavor to maximize the conditions for the sake of spreading the Buddhist teachings.

This autobiography goes through a life of three phases. Master Yin Shun mentioned to his followers that he wanted the book to be published only after his death, probably as a replacement of his active engagement in doing work to spread Buddhist teachings. He was so actively mindful of the function of the book that he wrote it three times, 1971 (26 chapters), 1993 (32 chapters), 1998 (35 chapters), each time after a major illness when he was prepared to die.

In terms of its content, although it is arranged more or less chronologically to reflect episodes of his long life, the overarching theme of yin-yuan is present among all these episodes. The chapters I have discussed in this presentation are chosen because of their explicitly bearing the words yin-yuan, but these chapters are not only illustrations of how causes and conditions manifest in our life; they are also excellent

examples to support the ideals of a Humanistic Buddhism among us. By leaving us *An Ordinary Life*, Master Yin Shun has actively tried to bring Buddhism to readers through speaking to them as an equal, encouraged us to perfect our unique human qualities of recollection, diligence and morality and promote the cultivation of self-purification by continually acting to benefit others, as seen in the stories of the good people he encountered along his life of practicing the dharma.



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