

## From the Grand to the Intimate: Great Strength Everywhere

Mahastamaprapta, Ta Shih Chih in Chinese, is the Bodhisattva of Great Strength, who with Avalokiteshwara (Kwan Yin, Great Compassion), assists Amitabha Buddha in awakening beings to Infinite Light and Life. When I visited Taiwan in early 2008 at the invitation of Venerable Master Tsung Tsu, what struck me most was the strength of the practice I observed everywhere.

Master Tsung Tsu kindly provided a cross-sectional view of Buddhist practice in his native country. We visited practice on a grand scale: an annual all-day sutra reading at a large temple in Kao-Hsiung, marvelously chanted by 4-5,000 people for the benefit of the nation; an up-to-the-minute preventive care hospital operated by the primarily lay volunteer organization Tzu Chi (Compassion & Benevolence Foundation); and the architecturally imposing new Chung Tai Chan Monastery, which provides a practice place and requisites for one thousand monastics—practically a small city—and Buddhist teachings for 108 lay centers throughout Taiwan and the world.

We also observed practice on a small and intimate scale. To mention just a few: near Chung Tai, one of Master Tsung Tsu's teachers, an 84-year-old monk of 70 years, affectionately referred to as "the Old Master"; just across the valley from Master Tsung Tsu's monastery, the handsome Chern Yuan Sze nuns' temple with its magnificent rosewood Pure Land triptych in the Buddha Hall, whose abbess, Venerable Seck Chun Ren [see photo], is our Dharma aunt (she was ordained by Venerable Seck Kim Seng about the time Rev. Master Jiyu left the Far East; the community gave me a box of

miniature scripture “amulets” to bring back as gifts to the congregation); another nuns’ monastery, with 60 nuns devoted to traditional practice, who cut, cook, and heat with firewood from the extensive temple grounds, and who weekly pick up 200 elderly lay people in the temple bus for lectures on the Amitabha Pure Land scriptures (they also kindly offered me monk’s clothing and shoes); the relics of the great pilgrim to India Master Hsuan Tsang (Xuan Zang), whose memorial temple overlooks the pristine, aquamarine Sun Moon Lake encircled by mountains; visits to a resident monk’s deceased mother and to a lay practitioner’s coma-stricken father-in-law, both for whom we chanted the Buddha’s name as a transfer of merit; and simply joining the resident monks’ daily routine at the main temple.

My favorite part of the visit, along with many hours conversing on the Dharma with Master Tsung Tsu as we traveled throughout the country, was the seven-day Amitabha Retreat held at his mountain temple and monks’ residence, De Lin Nien-Fo, in centrally-located Nantou County. Attended by 50 monastics and nearly 200 lay practitioners, the retreat’s schedule was similar to what the large monasteries of our Order follow: early rising, morning and evening service, formal meals, daily Dharma talks, and a long practice session each morning and afternoon reciting the Buddha’s name. I was surprised and impressed by the variety of the styles and rhythms of chanting Amitabha Buddha’s name—while circumambulating, sitting, and bowing; rapid, medium, slow, and every progression between!

The ceremonies and scriptures were similar to our liturgy, given our common Mahayana background. Among those specific to this retreat were Feeding the Hungry Ghosts ceremonies focusing

on outdoor altars to Kshtigarbha (Earth Store) Bodhisattva and Bhasajyaguru the Healing Buddha, and an entire afternoon recitation of *The Sutra of Bodhisattva Kshtigarbha's Fundamental Vows*. The main differences between their liturgy and ours were the Chinese language, the "ocean tide" style of musical chanting, and the emphasis on Amitabha Buddha of the Western Pure Land, in contrast to Serene Reflection/Soto Zen's focus on Shakyamuni Buddha and our use of English translations set to western plainsong. One could easily see how the devotional tone of Rev. Master Jiyu's liturgical compositions had its origin here in Chinese Mahayana practice. I must add that I am grateful to our Order's commitment to translating mantras and dharanis. Those that the temple used while I was there, such as *The Shurangama Litany* and *The Litany of the Great Compassionate One*, remain, like our Segaki mantras, in transliterated Sanskrit.

My visit confirmed everything Rev. Master Jiyu related to us about the magnificent practice of the Buddha Dharma in Asia. I offer my gratitude, with bows, to all who made generous offerings and who helped me feel right at home during my visit: Master Tsung Tsu, his disciples, his congregations at the nuns' Lungchuan Temple in Nantou City and the lecture hall in Taichung, and the many other monastics and lay people we met and visited. Everywhere we saw Great Compassion and Great Strength pouring forth from Infinite Light. And I offer gratitude and bows to Rev. Master Jiyu, who opened the door of the Dharma for us. Her teaching and Transmission made all this possible and comprehensible for an ordinary westerner like myself.

*Rev. Oswin*  
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