

## **BUDDHISM IN TAIWAN**

Buddhism was introduced to China some nineteen hundred years ago during the Eastern Han Period. The teachings of Lord Buddha have brought comfort and solace to countless millions in the vast land that has seen the rise and fall of numerous dynasties. Elements of Confucian precepts were injected to varying degrees as Buddhism continued to flourish. All aspects of the people's ways of thinking and living have been profoundly influenced by this religion that originated in India.

Buddhism in the meantime has spread far and wide elsewhere. People in Southeast Asia were among the very first to learn of Buddha and his philosophy. The Koreans and the Japanese have long been known for their adherence. Buddhism also has found believers in the West. The religion has its unique strength to establish a truly strong hold on people, for the teachings of Buddha the Merciful are indeed all-encompassing.

But the world as a whole has greatly changed. Many people are either too tense or too lax. Moral degeneration is serious and wide-spread. Stepped-up endeavour, through best possible means as demanded by the specific needs of this age, is a must for the Buddhist faithful.

### **Buddhist Organizations**

In China down through the centuries Buddhism found its expression centered around temples everywhere. Sectarian division continued but order was maintained in the absence of any organization as a national rallying point.

On April 1 in 1912, the first year of the ROC, the "Chung-hua Fo-chiao Tsung-hui" (Chinese Buddhist Association) was established in Shanghai, with Ven. Chi Chan as its President. A new name, "Chung-kuo Fo-chiao Hsueh-hui" (Chinese Buddhist Society), was adopted in 1928 when Ven. Tai Hsu was elected President. The following year, representatives from throughout the country gathered in Shanghai, chose the Association's present name ("Chung-kuo Fo-chiao-hui" – Chinese Buddhist Association; also known as the "Buddhist Association of the Republic of China" or "BAROC" for short), and elected Ven. Yuan Ying as President to lead new efforts to unite the Chinese Sangha and propagate the Dharma.

The outbreak of the War of Resistance in 1937 soon forced the government as well as BAROC to move to the interior. When the First National Congress of BAROC was held in Nanking in 1947, Ven. Chang Chia was elected President.

Two years later the Chinese mainland fell. The Members of the Sangha who meanwhile moved to Taiwan acted together with those born on the island and reactivated BAROC in Taipei in 1950. Ten BAROC Congresses have so far been held.

## **BAROC in Taiwan**

Ven. Pai Sheng, born in 1904 at Yingcheng of Hebei province, is now serving his fifth term as President of BAROC.

The BAROC Head Office is at 6 Shaoshing North Street, Taipei. Under BAROC are presently 3 Chapters – for the province of Taiwan (headed by Ven. Ching Hsin) and the special municipalities of Taipei (Ven. Ching Liang) and Kaohsiung (Ven. Pu Miao)

The Taiwan Chapter has 21 Branches: Ilan County, Keelung City, Taipei County, Taoyuan County, Hsinchu County, Hsinchu City, Miaoli County, Taichung County, Taichung City, Nantou County, Changhua County, Yunlin County, Chiayi County, Tainan County, Tainan City, Kaohsiung County, Pingtung County, Taitung County, Hualien County, Penghu County.

## **Structure**

The Head Office at the Chapters and Branches are all organized as civic bodies. Each has its Board of Directors and Supervisors that include Standing Members. The Presidents are in principle Members of the Sangha. The term of elected office-bearers is three years. Re-election may take place any number of times. General Meetings are held annually.

The BAROC Board of Directors has 28 Members (18 from the Sangha and 10 from the laity). The 28 include 8 Standing Members (5 from the Sangha and 3 from the laity). The Board of Supervisors is composed of 9 Members (including 3 lay followers). One lay follower and 3 Members of the Sangha are Standing Supervisors.

At the Head Office is a Secretariat headed now by Secretary-General Ven. Liao Chung. Under him are three departments that handle organizational activities, membership matters, and general affairs. There are 13 committees that deal with: (1) education and cultural affairs, (2) charity and public welfare, (3) international liaison, (4) youth activities, (5) propagation of Buddhist teachings, (6) protection of the Dharma, (7) examinations, (8) documents (9) rules and regulations, (10) financial affairs, (11) planning and designing, (12) temple assets, and (13) planning for rebuilding of Buddhist organizations following the recovery of the Chinese mainland.

## **Membership Sizes**

Temples registered as organizational members of these Chapters and Branches total about 1,600. Individual members registered over the years have added up to more than 110,000 in number including some 20,000 hailing from the Chinese mainland.

It is generally believed that Buddhist activities in the Taiwan area actually cover a much greater number of people. Surveys show over 70 per cent of the population give Buddhism as their religion.

The Sangha in the Taiwan area has more than 50,000 members, about three-quarters of them nuns.

## **Propagation of Teachings**

Training of the Sangha for propagation of Buddhist teachings is being carried out at five Buddhist studies institutes and some two dozen Buddhist academies, each offering courses of three or four years. Graduates total somewhere between 600 and 800 each year.

Buddhist periodicals published in Taiwan by organizations and private individuals total more than 30. They include weeklies, ten-day periodicals, semi-monthlies and monthlies.

Temple-sponsored radio and TV programs are well presented and quite popular. Public lecture meetings are often held. Spring, summer, autumn and winter tours are organized by various BAROC Chapters and Branches.

Most universities and independent colleges in Taiwan have societies for Buddhistic studies and activities. Participation in such extracurricular programs is voluntary. Summer and winter camps of various natures are sponsored by temples for students and others.

## **Continuation of Discipleship**

BAROC's one major responsibility is to assure continuation of Buddhist discipleship. This has been well carried out under the "Triple Altar Grand Ordination" Program initiated by Ven. Pai Sheng in 1952 when the first such session was held at the Ta Hsien Temple of Tainan in Southern Taiwan.

Sessions thereafter have taken place annually at major temples on a rotational basis. The number of monks and nuns ordained at each year's session ranges between 300 and 1,000. More than 20,000 males and females have thus received precepts to become Members of the Sangha. Precept-taking sessions for those who wish to remain in the laity are sponsored by at least a dozen

temples each year. More than 100,000 persons have attended such sessions to become professed devotees in the past three decades.

### **International Exchanges**

The teachings of the Buddha have long spread beyond national boundaries and geographical barriers. Followers in different countries can and should enhance fellowship through exchange programs.

There are ROC organizations specially established to promote Buddhist ties with their Japanese and Korean counterparts.

BAROC is a Regional Center of the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) that has its Headquarters in Bangkok. The Lay Buddhists Association of the ROC also is a WFB Member.

The Buddhist Sangha and laity of the ROC played key roles in reactivating the World Buddhist Sangha Council (WBSC) late in 1981 when the Council, after some 11 years of near standstill, held its Third Congress in Taipei. Delegates and observers totalled more than 600. Ven. Pai Sheng was elected WBSC President. Ven. Wu Yi, a Standing Director of BAROC, was elected Secretary-General for the Chinese Section. With Headquarters now in Taipei, WBSC has been holding Executive Committee Meetings and promoting related activities. The Council is now preparing to hold its Fourth Congress in Bangkok in spring 1985.

BAROC also has been in the core of the World Chinese Buddhist Sangha Council (WCBSC).

### **Social Services**

In line with Buddha's teachings about mercy and helping hands for all, the ROC Buddhists have actively promoted charitable activities and social services. A brief sketch follows:

- **Social Education:** In the Taiwan area are six Buddhist-operated secondary schools, all of them being known for their excellent work.

More than 20 scholarship funds have been established in the name of Buddhism by temples and private individuals. These are sources of great encouragement to outstanding students, particularly those from the less well-to-do families.

Comparatively larger temples have places set aside for free public access to reading materials and services.

- **Charity and Public Welfare:** Charity and relief setups are maintained by various BAROC Chapters and Branches and by individual temples, cloisters,

prayer groups, and Buddhist magazine publishing houses. Donations are collected and administered for regular and emergency relief services.

Three hospitals and more than a dozen clinics are operated by Buddhist sources in Taiwan. Half-rate and free services are provided if and when deemed necessary in view of the financial conditions of the patients.

There are eight Buddhist-operated Orphanages and five such Old People's Homes in Taiwan.

**- Public Buddhist Activities:** Prayer meetings are held regularly each month at BAROC Branches and the temples under them.

The Buddha's Birthday on April 8 each year is celebrated extensively. The Buddhists also actively take part in flag-day activities. Relationships between the Sangha and the laity are promoted in this and other ways.

Many Buddhist organizations and individuals have been cited by government agencies of their contribution to the advancement of social well-being.

(Information for this article was taken from a Brochure issued in Taiwan)