

# Is Buddhism Eco-friendly? Examining the Case of Tzu Chi in Taiwan Using Niklas Luhmann's Systems Theory

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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.

# 佛教是生態友善的嗎？

## 以盧曼系統理論檢視慈濟

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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。

**關鍵詞：**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「台灣本土宗教思想倫理對生態、環境的論述、影響與前瞻——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 about whether Buddhism is holistically ecological. By applying Niklas Luhmann's systems theory to Tzu Chi, a Taiwanese Buddhist group, this paper offers a different perspective on this debate.

## **Buddhism and Ecology**

Religious discourses on ecology have expanded alongside increasing global concern over environmental issues. The earliest Buddhist discourse on ecology has been traced to Japan's exhibit at the 1893 World's Fair, in which Zen Buddhism was presented as an environmental-friendly tradition (Johnston, 2006, p. 73). This image of Buddhism has since been implanted in the Western mind. Arne Naess, for example, assumes that Buddhism has a special affinity with his concept of Deep Ecology (Johnston, 2006, p. 87), while another important writer, Joanna Macy, suggests that the Buddhist concept of dependent co-arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) links humans interdependently with the natural world, thus providing a platform for Deep Ecology (Johnston, 2006, p. 78) (McMahan, 2008, pp. 170-172). The sense of a positive relationship between Buddhism and ecology has also been promoted by public figures such the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksa (Johnston, 2006, p. 77).

It was not until the late twentieth century that scholars began to raise questions about this supposed affinity (Holder, 2007, p. 113). Simon James, for instance, argues that Buddhism does not provide a holistic grounding for ecology:

Indeed, on the Buddhist view, any world we can capture in words, whether natural or urban, is considered to

belong to *samsāra*, the realm of craving and delusion. And this, for its part, is said to be real from which the wise will seek liberation. Hence, the liberated person, far from celebrating his or her oneness with the realm of nature, is one who is said to have ‘overcome the world’, to have overcome nature ... (James, 2007, p. 453).

McMahan further argues that the idealistic affinity between Buddhism and ecology asserted since the nineteenth century is nothing but a detraditionalized, demythologized and psychologized representation of Buddhism since the nineteenth century (2008, pp. 27-59):

The Romantic-Transcendentalist line of thinking supplied a ready array of motifs useful for hybridizing and transposing into the key of modern discourse the Buddhist concepts of dependent origination, assertions of nondualism, universalist ethics, and East Asian affinities with the natural world. These themes were not, however, sufficient to produce the synthesis that has emerged in today’s conception of interdependence. The final element was the infusion of recent theoretical approaches in the social and physical sciences, along with contemporary ecological thought. The synthesis of all of these elements did not in fact take place in a systematic way until quite recently (2008, p. 168).

The work of some other scholars confirms this perspective. Obadia, for instance, uses the anthropological study of the Sherpa people in northern Nepal to argue that Buddhist conservationist language derives from outside influence, rather than being an indigenous aspect of Buddhist culture. Furthermore, it has been argued that while Buddhism has a lot to say about animals, it has little to say about plants (Obadia, 2008, p. 124; Johnston, 2006, pp. 82-83). In other words, the view that Buddhism is an environmental-friendly tradition/ecological worldview is a modern and

romantic creation.

On the other hand, some scholars suggest viewing the relationship between Buddhism and ecology from a different perspective. Holder points out that a Buddhist principle of ecology can be found in early Buddhism, but for the most part concept of in the concept of suffering (*dukkha*), rather than interdependence:

Early Buddhism's unique approach to a concern for the natural world — via the suffering of sentient beings — may well prove to be the tradition's most important contribution to contemporary environmental ethics ... in an early Buddhist environmental ethics, care for the suffering of sentient beings implies care for the ecosystems in which these beings live and flourish. Understanding phenomena in terms of a wider nexus of causes or conditions has always been an emphasis of the Buddhist tradition. Thus, the wider environment (beyond sentient beings themselves) merits care and concern *indirectly* (2007, p. 125)

This position is adopted by many Buddhists. For example, the monk Dīpānanda argues that it is Buddhism's emphasis on morality that makes it an environmentally- friendly religion (Barua S., 2013).

Others argue that the even if Buddhist modernism (of which eco-Buddhism is a by-product) is indeed a romanticized synthesis of various religious and philosophical elements, this does not mean that its authenticity as a form of Buddhism should be questioned (Quli, 2009). After all, Buddhist modernism is “an ongoing process whereby the varied forms of Buddhism are attuned to the cultural and intellectual understandings of its historical milieu” (Ng, 2012, p. 190). Even James admits that although he does not think Buddhism offers a holistic grounding for ecology, Buddhism is ecological

because a Buddhist “has, through practice, come to develop certain virtues of character” (2007, p. 458) and thus is gentle and mindful towards the natural world. Similarly, Holder sorts ethics into different categories: theoretical ethics, environmental ethics, “lived” ethics and animal ethics. In particular, “lived” ethics, which concern a Buddhist’s actual “lived” behavior, are relevant to Buddhist grass-root environmental movements (2007, pp. 82-85). It has also been argued that different traditions of Buddhism have different approaches to environmental ethics: Pali canon has greater resources for developing anthropocentric and individualistic themes of environmental ethics and Mahāyana Buddhism has greater resources for developing non-anthropocentric and holistic environmental ethics (Gowans, 2015, p. 281). Given its thousands of years of history and the influence of a vast variety of geo-cultural elements, to say Buddhism is or is not ecologically-friendly is a simplistic statement. By applying the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann, I wish to add a different perspective to the debate about Buddhism and ecology.

## **Niklas Luhmann**

Niklas Luhmann (1927–1998) is one of the most important social theorists of the 20th century. He was a sociologist, but also a universal scholar who “produced a range of political and social analyses of modern society, commenting on pressing public problems” (Bechmann & Stehr, 2002, p. 67).

Rather than seeing society as a functional unity, Luhmann sees each society divided into various autopoietic and separated (sub)systems such as the legal system, the political system, etc. (Mattheis, 2012, p. 628). For Luhmann, the core of society is communication, and can only be

adequately understood in a global context (Bechmann & Stehr, 2002, p. 71).

Communication, according to Luhmann,

Designates not simply an act of utterance that 'transfers' information but an independent autopoietic operation that combines three different selections – information, utterance and understanding – into an emergent unity that can serve as the basis for further communication (Luhmann, 1986, p. 143).

For Luhmann, "religion can best be understood as semantics and praxis concerned with the distinction between the known and the unknown"; therefore, religion is a communication that makes the unknown to appear in the known (2012, p. 139). How Luhmann's theory of society consisting of communication helps us to understand the debate about Buddhism and ecology is discussed below.

Luhmann's systems theory also helps to clarify the confusion over the terms 'environmental' and 'ecology', as created by mass media (Luhmann, 2012, p. 73).

The confusion over these terms is also borne in mind in this paper. Scholars of Buddhism have used them to convey the idea of a biological/natural world. Not to linger on the etymologies, this paper borrows Luhmann's definition of ecological danger, and understands ecology as "to designate any communication about the environment" (Luhmann, 1986, p. 28).

## **Tzu Chi**

The Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation ("Tzu Chi" hereafter), commonly known as "Tzu Chi", is one of the largest civil

organizations in Taiwan. It began in 1966 with a modest membership of 30 housewives who followed bhikkhunī Dharma Master Cheng Yen's teachings and donated a small sum of money from their daily allowance to help the poor. Tzu Chi has now grown into a global organization with volunteers in 50 countries and 502 offices. It boasts hospitals, TV stations, a nursing college, high schools, a university, and, perhaps most unusual for a Buddhist organization, a bone-marrow bank.<sup>1</sup> Tzu Chi and its founder have become household names in Taiwan.

Given Tzu Chi's scale, it is no surprise that Tzu Chi has attracted academic attention in recent years. C. Julia Huang's *Charisma and compassion: Master Cheng Yen and the Buddhist Tzu Chi movement* is one example that has been praised (2009). Her book details the history and development of Tzu Chi so well that it would be redundant to repeat her findings as an introduction to Tzu Chi in this paper. Another, more recent, example is Yao Yu-Shuang's *Taiwan's Tzu Chi as Engaged Buddhism* (2012). The author attempts to discover the reasons for the popularity of Tzu Chi and its founder, nun Master Cheng Yen. She classifies Master Cheng Yen's teaching into teachings on karma and merit, worldly salvation, altruism and morality, and so on (2012, pp. 80-98), and she judges them to be so innovative that she calls Tzu Chi a 'new religion' (Yao, 2012, p. 98). However, I would see Tzu Chi's interpretation of Buddhist doctrine and practice as an expression of Buddhist modernism, one that is not too dissimilar from other Buddhist reform movements around Asia since the 19th century. For example, the Buddhist reform movement led by Anagārika Dharmapāla in Sri Lanka at the turn of the twentieth century also shares the characteristics of demythologization, being ethic-oriented, etc. (Gombrich &

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<sup>1</sup> Tzu Chi official website: <http://www.tzuchi.org>, accessed on 21/1/2014.



Obeyesekere, 1988, pp. 202-240). Those are ideas not too dissimilar from Buddhist modernism as discussed by McMahan (2008).

Master Cheng Yen's teachings express a sense of demythologization by disregarding the traditional practice of worshiping deities, emphasizing the humanity of the Buddha and the importance of science (Yao, 2012, pp. 84-85). Also, Yao points out that Master Cheng Yen's teachings stress the importance of collective karma and the inevitable interrelationship between an individual and society (2012, pp. 80-81). Most important in Master Cheng Yen's teachings is the emphasis on practice: "Master Cheng Yen emphasizes the learning of Buddhism through practical work, and avoids the scholarly or intellectual approach" (Yao, 2012, p. 99). I intend to use Luhmann's systems theory approach to shed light on the debate over ecology and Buddhism by examining works to protect the environment carried out by Tzu Chi.

## **Eco-Religious Communication**

"Environmental Protection" is among the eight missions listed on Tzu Chi's official website is "Environmental Protection". At first glance, this seems to confirm the genuineness of Buddhist ecology. For example, there is an online Tzu Chi article titled "Change Bad Environmental Karma".<sup>2</sup> The beginning of the article cites the story of an encounter between the Buddha and an elderly fisherman. The article criticizes the fisherman for being concerned only about his and his son's suffering while turning a blind eye to the suffering of the fish. The article concludes that,

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<sup>2</sup> "Gaibian Huanjing Erye", [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](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.

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...<sup>3</sup>

Buddhist concepts such as karma, suffering, and purifying the mind, etc. are evoked, and this seems to endorse the existence of Buddhist ecology.

The problem is that this concern with 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 trash 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. Building Pure Land on earth is what I'd hope for.<sup>4</sup>

This incident supposedly launched Tzu Chi's Environmental Protection mission. It is significant that this was in 1990; environmental concerns had begun to gain public attention in Taiwan during the 1980s (Chen, 2011, pp. 19-20), and the launch of the Environmental Protection mission reflects the social sentiment of the time. In contrast, ecology as a social theme in human communication was absent throughout most of history:

Compared to the history of reflection on humanity and

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* My translation.

<sup>4</sup> "Ciji Huanbao Yuanqi", <http://www.tzuchi.net/aas.nsf/4d8e11ee4d310d784825719a00355c79/e1274fafb4f7fd9f4825734a00131f13?OpenDocument>. Accessed on 2 February 2014. My translation.

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, p. 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, p. 78). The application of religious sources for ecological discourse is thus a contemporary attempt. Tellingly, while some contemporary scholars debate the question whether Buddhism offers ecological inspiration, others contemplate the Pāli term for the English word “nature” (Upali, 2008). If a Pāli equivalent for the English word “nature” has to be thought up, it implies a very different worldview behind the writing or redacting of the Buddhist Pāli canons from contemporary cultural context and ecological discourse.

Another example is vegetarianism, which Tzu Chi promotes as part of its Environmental Protection mission. Although vegetarianism has been a norm in Chinese Buddhism for centuries (Harvey, 2000, p. 164), Tzu Chi has a new perspective on it. One Tzu Chi article cites a 2006 report by UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization to highlight the 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!<sup>5</sup>

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 by Tzu Chi is evidently motivated by contemporary ecological crisis.

## To Purify One's Mind

In the debate on Buddhism and ecology, one question is often raised: does Buddhism offer a genuinely Buddhist discourse on ecology? From the perspective of 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, pp. 94-99). Theoretically, then, the debate over the genuineness of Buddhist ecology is pointless, since *no* religion can claim a genuine and adequate relationship with ecology. But religion as communication (Günzel, 2013, pp. 79-80) functions in a self-referential operative network and is understood "according to its own universe of meaning" (Günzel, 2013, p. 81). That is: however ecologically inadequate eco-religious communication may be, it is still meaningful within the religious subsystem.

For Joanna Macy, the Buddhist concept of dependent co-arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) is what makes Buddhism ecological,<sup>6</sup> while John Holder suggests morality (2007). Based on Tzu Chi's website and

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<sup>5</sup> "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](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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

publications, the environmental ethics promoted by Tzu Chi might be summarized into one verse: “to purify one’s mind.”

For example, Master Cheng Yen says:

The 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 our mind in good maintenance, and to conserve it well, so that we can avoid a landslide within. I often say, “Walk gently, 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’ minds ...<sup>7</sup>

The only way to prevent natural disaster is to harmonize human mind, and by overcoming the disaster within human mind (Shih C. , 2010, p. 87).<sup>8</sup>

In the statements above, the 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.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Xindi de Shuitu Baochi”, <http://www.tzuchi.net/aas.nsf/4d8e11ee4d310d784825719a00355c79/50e02daa0abd62884825734a00131f0d?OpenDocument>. Accessed on 2 February 2014. My translation.

<sup>8</sup> My translation.

<sup>9</sup> “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](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.

Disasters are 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. The result was that 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.<sup>10</sup>

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

Let's unite with love and radiate wholesomeness to encompass the globe in order to nourish the earth and purify human mind.<sup>11</sup>

...Only by cultivating the mind with wholesome roots and disseminating the seeds of wholesomeness, then we may harvest blessings and elude misfortunate (Shih C. , 2010, p. 92).<sup>12</sup>

Saving the world begins with saving the mind. Everyone has love in their 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

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<sup>10</sup> “Manzu zhidao – 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](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.

<sup>11</sup> “Daai Qingliu rao Quanqiu”, <http://www.tzuchi.net/aas.nsf/4d8e11ee4d310d784825719a00355c79/761ccb02fee2495d482573fb0015b530?OpenDocument>. Accessed on 5 February 2014. My translation.

<sup>12</sup> My translation.

mind, covetous thoughts can be overcome.<sup>13</sup>

In short, Tzu Chi's environmental ethics emphasize the virtue of mind, in the way that only through a purified and wholesome mind might environmental protection be possible. This corresponds with 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.

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

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, p. 82).

## Becoming Bodhisattva

The most significant achievement of Tzu Chi's Environmental

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<sup>13</sup> “Yaocong Jiuxin Kaishi”, <http://www.tzuchi.net/aas.nsf/4d8e11ee4d310d784825719a00355c79/d4bd4315c92ee824482573520008c1c2?OpenDocument>. Accessed on 5 February 2014. My translation.

Protection mission appears to be garbage recycling. Under the encouragement of Master Cheng Yen, recycling stations have been set up to collect and sort out recyclable garbage. By 2008, Tzu Chi had more than 5,000 recycling stations and more than 72,000 certified recycling volunteers in Taiwan, and an estimated further 735 recycling stations and 8,800 recycling volunteers in other countries (Shih & Tsai, 2012, p. 74). Recycled plastics are re-manufactured into Eco-green blankets and garments and are subsequently distributed in other charity missions.<sup>14</sup> A French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, reports that ten national teams in the 2014 football World Cup in Brazil wore jerseys made of recycled plastic bottles manufactured by Taiwanese companies. Tzu Chi's recycling program is mentioned in the report (Bleux, 2014), testifying to the success of Tzu Chi's recycling program. 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, 2013). Although the degree of Tzu Chi's influence on Taiwanese recycling habits cannot be known for certain,<sup>15</sup> the achievement is certainly remarkable.

According to 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

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<sup>14</sup> "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](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.

<sup>15</sup> The increased amount of recycled garbage coincided the general growth of ecological awareness in Taiwan.



money, power, love, law, truth (Rončević & Makarovič, 2010, p. 225). 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.

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 information about recycling to a global audience; Tzu Chi's eco-message thus reaches a wide range of audiences.

For Tzu Chi, the 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' minds ... (Shih C., 2010, p. 212).<sup>16</sup>

Further:

A recycling station is a wondrous temple for the mind. Its outer energy can save the earth and inner energy can

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<sup>16</sup> My translation.

purify human mind (Shih C., 2010, p. 235).<sup>17</sup>

Tzu Chi volunteers are affectionately called ‘bodhisattvas’ and are publicly complimented as such by Master Cheng Yen (Shih & Tsai, 2012, p. 74). Recruitment adverts for volunteers on the Tzu Chi website have the title: “Recruit Bodhisattva in the Human Realm”.<sup>18</sup> When Tzu Chi media publish stories about its volunteers, the volunteers are again usually called ‘bodhisattvas’. The usage 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, they are engaging in spiritual practice.

By turning the laborious work of recycling garbage into a 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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<sup>17</sup> My translation.

<sup>18</sup> “Zhigong Zhaomu – renjian pusa da zhaosheng”, [http://tw.tzuchi.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=232&Itemid=284&lang=zh](http://tw.tzuchi.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=232&Itemid=284&lang=zh). Accessed on 6 February 2014. My translation.

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