

Monastery in the Hudson Valley

Summary: The Chuang Yen Monastery in Kent, New York, is a prime example of how Chinese Buddhism has flourished in America, in all its richness and complexity.

When Dr. Chia Theng Shen, his wife Woo Ju Shen, and other leaders of the Buddhist Association of the United States (BAUS) decided, in 1981, to construct a temple in the rolling hills of the Hudson River Valley, they hoped to recreate the sanctity and tranquillity of such Pure Lands as Sukhavati, the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss presided over by Amitabha Buddha and the Eastern Pure Land of Azure Radiance, the domain of Bhaisajya-guru. The dense woodland which shelters Chuang Yen Monastery must seem a wholly different world for BAUS members who make the ninety-minute drive up to Kent, N.Y., from the Temple of Enlightenment, their main center in New York City.

Winding along the driveway through the 125-acre property, one may hear the gentle hum of chanting before actually seeing any of the buildings or the massive statue of Vairochana, the Cosmic Buddha. Thirty seven feet tall, it is the largest statue of a seated Buddha in the Western hemisphere. Eventually, twelve images of bodhisattvas will encircle Vairochana and they in turn will be surrounded by 10,000 miniature statues of the Buddha sitting in a meditative trance on a lotus flower. The entire ensemble is housed in the Great Buddha Hall, accommodating 2,000 people.

Prior to the completion of the main sanctuary, chanting services were conducted in Kuan Yin (Guanyin) Hall. Within this hall were two statues of Avalokiteshvara, or Guanyin, as the Chinese translated the bodhisattva's name. The larger image, which dates from the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE), shows a seated male figure leaning back on one arm. The central image, which is of Guanyin standing next to another bodhisattva, Sudana, dates from the Song dynasty (960-1279 CE). This female Guanyin holds a willow branch to dispel demons and a vase of nectar to heal suffering. Although the reason for the bodhisattva's change in gender is shrouded in mystery, Tantric Buddhism possibly played a role. In the Tibetan tradition, each bodhisattva has a consort. The union of the two represents the joining of the bodhisattva's wisdom with the compassion of his mate. Since Avalokiteshvara's task was one of great compassion, the

Chinese may have taken him as his consort Pandaravasini, whose name means “Clad in White,” the color of the bodhisattva’s garb since the Song dynasty.

Behind Kuan Yin Hall stands Yin Kuang Hall and Five Concentrations Hall, the two dormitories for monks and nuns. The monks and nuns, including the abbot Fa Yao, divide their time between Chuang Yen Monastery, the Temple of Enlightenment, and a temple in Taiwan. Also on monastery grounds is Woo Ju Library, the home of the Institute for Advanced Studies of World Religions. All English language activities, including meditation classes, take place in T’ai Hsu (Tai Xu) Hall, named after the most famous Chinese Chan master of the 20th century.

Chuang Yen Monastery provides peace not only for the living, but for the deceased as well. Just behind Five Concentrations Hall, near the crest of a small hill, is Thousand Lotus Memorial Terrace. In the two tiers of walls built into the embankment are 1,050 places for ashes of the dead. A special marker identifies the final resting place of Woo Ju Shen, the first to be interred here after she passed away in 1981.