

Disneyland, but where are the puppets?

A report on DDM Sydney's recent trip to Taiwan

Nong Chan Temple

Our first two evenings were spent at Nong Chan Temple in Taipei. Nong Chan literally means "Agricultural Chan". It was founded by Master Sheng Yen's teacher, Master Dong Chu, in 1971. Originally intended as a place where people could live a traditional isolated Chinese monastic lifestyle based on subsistence agriculture, it has since gone through a number of expansions and has transformed into a continuous hive of lay and monastic community activity, peaking every Saturday evening when thousands gather to chant the Dabei Zhou (Great Compassion Dharani) together.

Though the days of tilling are over at Nong Chan, it is still a no-frills kind of venue. The walls have been cobbled together on the run to meet the needs of the ever expanding DDM community. Mosquitoes and strange odours happily breed in the open drains that run just outside the dormitories. Yet this is the place where the DDM story all started. It was the commitment, creativity and perseverance of the people within these creaky walls that brought forth the DDM World Center, which arguably boasts some of the most sophisticated architecture and organizational structures in all of Taiwan. When we look behind Nong Chan's Temple's rustic exterior we see a seat of great power and practice.

Taichung Center

On the third day we visited the DDM center in Taichung in central Taiwan. As a reflection of DDM's modern outlook, it is located in a refurbished office block. Instead of the wildly baroque designs and multicoloured flourishes of traditional Chinese temples, the interior of the Taichung Center revolves around an unadorned respect for natural materials. The plain wooden floors and the right-angles of the wooden fixtures accentuated the elegant curves and greens of the indoor plants. Crisply dressed volunteers in navy blue uniforms reminiscent of air stewardesses scurried about in preparation for the massive Dabei Zhou to be held later that night. They also served us a vegetarian feast. Relaxing and full-bellied from their hospitality, we pondered on the possibility of building a center and community like Taichung in Sydney.

World Center for Buddhist Education

We spent the last week or so of the trip at the DDM World Center for Buddhist Education. The World Center is nestled in the mountains by a small seaside town known as Jinshan. It was only inaugurated in late October last year, and as we passed the stacks of heavy stone paving at the foot of the mountain, it was clear that the center is a constant work in progress. But given the scale of the

plans DDM has for the World Center it is difficult to imagine a time when construction will stop.

Stage one of the construction process was completed in October. There now stands structures and facilities that provide for residential monastic training, meditation retreats for the general public, grounds for walking and contemplation, pilgrimage paths, a museum and art gallery space, several Buddha and Guanyin halls, a center of Buddhist academic studies complete with a state of the art library, an administrative center, an international conference center and guest quarters. The World Center is currently proceeding with stage two of construction. Across the way from the guest quarters, bulldozers and cranes are transforming the mountainside into a terrace amenable to the creation of an international college of humanities and social sciences. It is mind-bending to think that all this emerged from the rickety shed that is Nong Chan Temple.

Ostensibly we were there to work as volunteers at The Fifth Chung-Hwa International Conference on Buddhism whose theme was “Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (Guanyin) and Modern Society”. Our job was to usher in the visiting scholars, treat them like VIPs and attend to their every need. But their needs were few, so the upshot was that we did very little volunteer work and received, by association, all the perks prepared for the VIPs. We stayed in the same guest quarters that they did, quarters with the facilities of an international hotel. We ate the same gourmet vegetarian food they ate. We heard the same presentations they heard. Far from serving the VIPs, we benefited so much that we felt like one of the VIPs themselves.

Of course, more impressive than any of the buildings or facilities built by DDM was the heart-felt warmth and friendliness and unwavering commitment of the thousands of volunteers and monastics there. DDM is an example of how successful a society oriented towards personal contribution – as opposed to consumption – can be. Visitors and volunteers share equally the fruits of the mountain. Indeed, if it were not for the uniforms it would be impossible to tell one from the other. The volunteers are so joyful in their commitment. Smiles come easily to them and barriers between people are few.

The imposing dark wooden gate with grey slated roof at the foot of the DDM World Center reminded me of the ticket gate at the front of Tokyo Disneyland. The World Center and Disneyland do, after all, have their similarities. Both are self-contained microcosms of the world as we dream it to be. But there is an essential difference. While Disneyland is the happiest place on earth, it is populated by a community of puppets and cartoon characters. For Disneyland, happiness is a thing to be visited and fantasized about. For DDM, happiness is right here and now.