

An Interpretation of Yin Shun's Ren Jiao Fo Jiao in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract:

According to the main tenets of Yin Shun's *Ren Jian Fo Jiao*, sentient beings should seek rebirth in the human realm rather than a heavenly pure land because one directly enters Buddhahood in the human realm, representing the quickest path. Yin Shun envisioned that *Ren Jian Jing Tu* is the transformation of the human realm into a pure land through the removal of the *dukkha* of sentient beings. Rather than focusing on the chanting of the Buddha's name (*nien fo*), which was seen as a form of upāya (*fang bian*), for example, Yin Shun advocated the need to follow the bodhisattva path (*pu sa dao*) and to adopt the bodhi-mind (*puti xin*). The bodhisattva practice of creating a pure land on earth is made possible through tangible acts of service which can manifest in the form of humanitarian work.

With the on-set of COVID-19 in 2019, how would Yin Shun's *Ren Jian Fo Jiao* be interpreted in light of the global pandemic? How would Yin Shun's *Ren Jian Jing Tu* be envisioned, and what would bodhisattva practice look like? I propose to shed light on a nuanced view of Yin Shun's *Ren Jian Fo Jiao* through a discussion of the notion of collective karma, which is defined as a group's experience of the law of cause and effect. For instance, the global pandemic can be interpreted as the fruition or effect of past accumulated karma of the world's population. In this case, how would the human realm be transformed into a *Ren Jian Jing Tu*?

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I propose the following three preliminary observations: 1) The creation of a *Ren Jian Jing Tu* could be envisioned through an individual's personal responsibility to prevent the spread of COVID-19, acting as an extension of bodhisattva practice, 2) the global pandemic heightened Yin Shun's advocacy of the preciousness of human life and earthly mortality, and 3) the corona virus challenged Yin Shun's emphasis on self-power (the reliance on personal efforts vs. the other powers of deities) by limiting personal autonomy and control; in turn, self-power had to be negotiated in a new light. These observations will be investigated through a study of organizational practices of Buddhism in Taiwan from 2019 to 2023.

Keywords: Humanistic Buddhism, Pure Land in the Human Realm, COVID-19, Pandemic

從 COVID-19 疫情來詮釋 印順法師的「人間佛教」

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摘要：

根據印順法師的思想，如何在全球大流行病中在人間建立淨土？淨土將如何構想？佛陀的法教或修行將如何應用？

根據印順法師「人間佛教」的主要原則，眾生應該尋求在人間轉生，而不是追求天上的淨土，因為在人間可以直接成佛，代表著最快的道路。印順法師構想了「人間淨土」是通過消除眾生的苦厄，將人間轉化為淨土。與專注念佛不同，被視為方便法門。印順法師主張需要追隨菩薩道，並培養菩提心。菩薩在地上創造淨土的修行是通過實際的奉獻行為實現，具體可呈現為人道主義工作的形式。

隨著 2019 年 COVID-19 的爆發，如何在疫病全球大流行的背景下詮釋印順法師的「人間佛教」？「人間淨土」將如何構想？菩薩修行又會是什麼樣子？我建議通過討論集體業力的概念，對印順法師的「人間佛教」進行解釋，集體業力被定義為群體對因果律的體驗。例如，全球大流行病可以被解釋為世界人口過去累積的業力的果報或效應。在這種情況下，人間將如何轉化為「人間淨土」？

我提出以下三個初步觀察：1. 創造「人間淨土」可以通過個人的責

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任來防止 COVID-19 的傳播，作為菩薩修行的延伸；2. 全球大流行病加強了印順法師對人生珍貴和凡人有限性的倡導；3. 新冠病毒挑戰了印順法師對自力（依靠個人努力而不是神祇的其他力量）的強調，通過限制個人的自主權和控制權；自力必須以新的角度來討論。這些觀察將通過研究 2019 年至 2023 年間台灣佛教組織的實踐來進行調查。

關鍵詞：人間佛教、人間淨土、新冠肺炎、流行病

According to the main tenets of Venerable Yin Shun's *Ren Jian Jing Tu* (Pure Land in the Human Realm), sentient beings should seek rebirth in the human realm rather than a heavenly pure land because one directly enters Buddhahood in the human realm, representing the quickest path.¹ Yin Shun states, "Only the human beings who are so difficult to come into existence, have the ability and opportunity to follow the Buddha."² Venerable Yin Shun envisioned that *Ren Jian Jing Tu* is the transformation of the human realm into a pure land through the removal of the *duhkha* of sentient beings.³ Rather than focusing on the chanting of the Buddha's name (*nien fo*), which was seen as a form of convenient practice (*fang bian fa*) or skillful means⁴, for example, Venerable Yin Shun advocated the need to follow the bodhisattva⁵ path (*pu sa dao*) and to adopt the bodhi-mind (*puti xin*), the resolve to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all beings.⁶ The bodhisattva practice of creating a pure land on earth is made possible through tangible acts of service which can manifest in the form of social welfare practices.

¹ For a summary list of Venerable Yin Shun's main writings on the topic of Buddhism for the Human World, see my work, "The Practice of Yin Shun's *Ren Jian Fo Jiao*: A Case Study of Fu Yan College, Dharma Drum Mountain and Tzu Chi Buddhist Compassion Relief," Master's thesis, University of Calgary, 2008, 14.

² Venerable Yin Shun, *The Road from Man to Buddha* (Carmel: The Institute for Advanced Studies of World Religions, 1994), 8.

³ Po-Yao Tien, "A Modern Buddhist Monk-Reformer in China: The Life and Thought of Yin-Shun," ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1995, 264.

⁴ Venerable Yin Shun, *Buddhism for the Human Realm*, 40, based on excerpts of translations from Chinese to English in my, "The Practice of Yin Shun's *Ren Jian Fo Jiao*: A Case Study of Fu Yan College, Dharma Drum Mountain and Tzu Chi Buddhist Compassion Relief," Master's thesis, University of Calgary, 2008, 20.

⁵ In this paper, I adopt Venerable Yin Shun's definition of a bodhisattva, a sentient being who has the resolve to attain great bodhi (enlightenment) for all living beings. Venerable Yin Shun, *The Way to Buddhahood* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1998), 217.

⁶ *The Road from Man to Buddha*, 18-19.

The central problem that I have set out to consider is as follows: With the on-set of COVID-19 in 2019, how would Venerable Yin Shun's *Ren Jian Jing Tu* be interpreted in light of the global pandemic? How would Venerable Yin Shun's *Ren Jian Jing Tu* be envisioned, and what would bodhisattva practice look like? How would the human realm be transformed into a *Ren Jian Jing Tu* during a pandemic such as COVID-19?⁷ Lastly what are the metaphorical parallels between the pandemic and Venerable Yin Shun's *Ren Jian Jing Tu*? In this reflection paper, I propose to shed light on a nuanced view of Venerable Yin Shun's *Ren Jian Fo Jiao*.

I propose the following four reflections: 1) The creation of a *Ren Jian Jing Tu* can be envisioned through an individual's personal responsibility to prevent the spread of COVID, acting as an extension of bodhisattva practice, interpreted by the need for individuals to social distance from one another, to stay home, and to quarantine. 2) The global pandemic heightened Venerable Yin Shun's advocacy of the preciousness of human life and earthly mortality, reflected by the need to follow public health and safety measures. 3) The call for mass vaccinations is a metaphorical parallel to the embodiment of the dharma, serving as a way of immunizing one against the pains of samsara. 4) Lastly, the transition and reliance on virtual methods in order to maintain the "normalcy" of the pre-pandemic world is a metaphorical parallel to those seeking rebirth in the distant pure land, an ideal which was challenged by Venerable Yin Shun. These observations will be discussed through a reflection of global measures and practices during the COVID pandemic from 2019-2023, and similar parallels in the bodhisattva path teachings.

1. Self-quarantining as an Extension of the Bodhisattva Practice of Morality (Sila)

First, I claim that the creation of a *Ren Jian Jing Tu* could be envisioned through personal responsibility. Before expanding on the connection between

⁷ Herein referred to as COVID.

self-quarantining and bodhisattva practice, I shall briefly describe the reasons for self-isolation and provide examples highlighting the extent of self-isolation during the pandemic. At the onset and height of the COVID pandemic, mass populations were required to self-quarantine at home due to the fact that symptoms may not have been present in infected individuals.⁸ As the symptoms lay dormant in the incubation stage of the virus, individuals were seen as vehicles for unknowingly spreading COVID to others.⁹ Subsequently, individuals were asked to stay in their homes, to limit their social circle to a prescribed number of close friends, to avoid going out to public places, and to cancel family gatherings.¹⁰ If one was not a front line worker who provided an essential public service such as a nurse, doctor, or one who was employed in the health care sector, one was required to work from home.¹¹ Those who could complete their work at home, turned their homes into a remote office because the workplace was seen as a threat or hazard for spreading and contracting COVID.¹² Teachers and educators were told to transition their classrooms to online platforms, and the online classroom was transformed into a virtual school for students.¹³ When required

⁸ Isaac Yen-Hao Chu, Prima Alam, Heidi J. Larson, and Leesa Lin, "Social Consequences of Mass Quarantine during Epidemics: A Systematic Review with Implications for the COVID-19 Response," *Journal of Travel Medicine* 27, no. 7 (2020): 2.

⁹ Elias, Christelle, Abel Sekri, Pierre Leblanc, Michel Cucherat, and Philippe Vanhems, "The Incubation Period of COVID-19: A Meta-Analysis," *International Journal of Infectious Diseases* 104 (2021): 709.

¹⁰ Isaac Yen-Hao Chu et al., "Social Consequences of Mass Quarantine during Epidemics," 2.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Riva, Michele Augusto, Maria Emilia Paladino, Andrea Paleari, and Michael Belingheri, "Workplace COVID-19 Vaccination, Challenges and Opportunities," *Occupational Medicine* 72, no. 4 (2022): 235.

¹³ Adedoyin, Olasile Babatunde, and Emrah Soykan, "Covid-19 Pandemic and Online learning: The Challenges and Opportunities," *Interactive learning*

to leave home, individuals were advised to social distance a measure of six feet from one another to prevent airborne contamination and to minimize the threat of contact contamination.¹⁴ Families were advised to send designated messengers to leave the home, for example, to retrieve essential goods such as groceries and household supplies.¹⁵ Those present with cold or flu-like symptoms such as a runny nose, sore throat, cough, fever or sneezing or those who were infected, for example, were asked to stay at home for up to two weeks until the symptoms subsided and until one recovered.¹⁶

Venerable Yin Shun stated that *Ren Jian Jing Tu* was made possible through the practice of the bodhisattva path¹⁷, and I assert that staying home could be seen as an extension of the bodhisattva duty to care for others by preventing the spread of the virus. The act of self-quarantining could be interpreted as a civic duty and responsibility to prevent the spread of COVID and to prevent the contracting of the virus because it involves putting aside one's personal desires for the greater good of humanity. I claim that the physical nature of the body being restrained in isolation is connected with the

environments (2020): 863.

¹⁴ Schneider, Alyssa, and Emily B. Kroska, "Face Covered and Six Feet Apart: Behavioral Awareness Predicts Greater Adherence to Public Health Guidelines during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 16 (2021): 1.

¹⁵ Ainsley Hawthorn, "Pandemic Groceries: 1 Person, Once a Week may be the Ideal, but it shouldn't be the Law," *CBC News*, April 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/pov-ainsley-hawthorn-pandemic-groceries-1.5542116>.

¹⁶ Laurel Wamsley and Selena Simmons-Duffin, "The Science Behind A 14-Day Quarantine After Possible COVID-19 Exposure," National Public Radio, April 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/04/01/824903684/the-science-behind-a-14-day-quarantine-after-possible-covid-19-exposure>.

¹⁷ For a summary of Venerable Yin Shun's views of the Pure Land and the importance of the bodhisattva path, see Po-Yao Tien's "A Modern Buddhist Monk-Reformer in China: The Life and Thought of Yin-Shun," 241-242.

Bodhisattva perfection of morality (*sila*), wherein an individual exerts effort and the individual stops from thinking or doing harmful things to both oneself and others.¹⁸ The body, which is perceived as a threat and carrier of the virus, needed to be restrained through one's willpower. Although it could be argued that people were required by the government to stay home and thus, the act of self-quarantining was not a selfless act but one that was mandated, people ultimately had the autonomy and free-will to disobey such mandates. The act of staying home required self-regulation, as anyone could technically leave their front door and go where they pleased; unless they were stopped by the authorities, individuals ultimately had self-autonomy over the movement of their bodies even under the threat of being reported by neighbors or being recorded by video surveillance. The decision to exercise restraint and willpower are necessary prerequisites for the perfection of morality. On the importance of willpower, Yin Shun states,

Some people casually practice this or that, without determination and perseverance, and eventually develop bad habits and accomplish nothing. So one must be cautious. Once one has started to practice, one should proceed from the beginning to the end without giving up. Only in this way can one develop firm will power.¹⁹

To further expand on the concept of morality, the Buddha's teachings include the five major precepts of 1) refraining from taking life, 2) refraining from taking what is not given, 3) refraining from illicit sexual behavior, 4) refraining from falsehood or telling untruths, and 5) refraining from taking intoxicants.²⁰ I assert that the types of restraint practiced during the pandemic can be related to each of the five major precepts as follows: 1) The precept of refraining from taking life was observed by preventing the spread of COVID

¹⁸ Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 121.

¹⁹ Venerable Yin Shun, *The Way to Buddhahood*, 251.

²⁰ See page 9 of Venerable Yin Shun's *The Road from Man to Buddha* for his discussion of the five precepts.

and potentially causing severe illness and death to others, as one was considered to be an agent of threat to the public's safety. 2) The refrain from taking what is not given was reflected by not stockpiling or taking more than what was needed for limited goods or supplies in low quantities such as face masks, hand sanitizer, toilet paper and disinfectants.²¹ 3) Refraining from sexual misconduct could be interpreted as limiting intimacy with others in terms of social contact and in giving up personal pleasures such as public forms of entertainment, going out to the movies, theatres, museums and concerts, or giving up traveling for pleasure, for instance. 4) Refraining from telling untruths was reflected through the need for an honest and transparent process of self-policing in the form of observing physical symptoms of the virus, performing at-home Rapid Antigen Tests, and following government protocols of self-regulation by reducing contact with one's social circle, for instance.²² 5) Lastly, the precept of refraining from intoxicants such as drugs or alcohol could be interpreted as abstaining from intoxicants that get in the way of having a clear mind. I interpret intoxicants metaphorically as seeking the wrong sources of information about the COVID virus and spreading false information, which in turn could potentially cause harm to oneself and others.²³ In order to abide by the fifth precept, the act of refrain is employed by abstaining from seeking false avenues of information such as false

²¹ For a detailed discussion on the details and reasons for stockpiling during COVID, see Micalizzi, Lauren, Nicholas S. Zambrotta, and Michael H. Bernstein's "Stockpiling in the Time of COVID-19." *British Journal of Health Psychology* 26, no. 2 (2021): 535-543.

²² For a thorough explanation of the varying levels of self-regulation during COVID, see Zinchenko, Yury P., Varvara I. Morosanova, Nailia G. Kondratyuk, and Tatiana G. Fomina, "Conscious Self-regulation and Self-Organization of Life during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Psychology in Russia: State of the Art* 13, no. 4 (2020): 168-182.

²³ For a detailed discussion of the spreading of misinformation about the origins of COVID, see Ball, Philip, and Amy Maxmen, "The Epic Battle Against Coronavirus Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories." *Nature* 581, no. 7809 (2020): 371-375.

narratives or conspiracy theories perpetuated on social media or the internet.²⁴ In this way, the sober or clear mind stream is attained; I claim that the clear mind is crucial for filtering out false information.

It is important to clarify the dilemma that morality, defined as the need to avoid evil and to do good deeds, was not a straightforward matter presented in black or white during the COVID pandemic. Government protocols and restrictions were in clash with personal liberties, and government mandates, though rooted in good intentions, might not necessarily have equated with what was good for the health and welfare of society.²⁵ To add to the complexity, the opinions of scientists who studied the Coronavirus were not in agreement with one another about what safety measures were effective or not, and sometimes the opinions contradicted measures established by the government.²⁶ Nonetheless, like the Buddha's advocacy for following morality, the COVID pandemic forced the global population to change their entire lifestyle, habits, and ways of living, a process that could not be achieved overnight but could only be embedded in an individual's day to day life through self-reminders, repetition, restraint and practice. The pandemic involved renouncing our pre-pandemic conditions of normalcy by giving up personal pleasures and desires, and called for a greater personal responsibility by contributing to a new vision of a safe world, in which the threat of the virus could be contained.²⁷ Wherein bodhisattvas were dressed in regal silk robes, jeweled crowns, and precious gemstone jewelry in classical representations, the bodhisattvas were replaced by images of individuals in a safety gown, face

²⁴ Romer, Daniel, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Conspiracy Theories as Barriers to Controlling the Spread of COVID-19 in the US," *Social Science & Medicine* 263 (2020): 2.

²⁵ Colin Lee, "Regulating Autonomy: A Clash between Classical Liberalism, Public Health, and the Constitution," *Kennedy School Review* 21 (2020): 90.

²⁶ Jennifer L. Pomeranz, and Aaron R. Schwid. "Governmental Actions to Address COVID-19 Misinformation," *Journal of Public Health Policy* 42 (2021): 209.

²⁷ Definitions of normalcy will be discussed on pp. 34-36 of this paper.

mask and gloves. Wherein front line workers or essential service workers were a metaphorical symbol of higher beings, in my opinion, who put their lives in danger for the sake of serving others, it was equally important for non-front line workers to contribute to the welfare of society. The vision of a safer world could also be equated to the metaphorical grip that samsara, the cycle of rebirth, has on trapped sentient beings (*zong sheng*). To explain, like the grip of samsara, the pandemic trapped people by placing them on lockdown; the freedom from samsara was envisioned in a future promise of being able to leave the home, on the condition that the vast majority showed restraint in following government protocols. In the same way, Venerable Yin Shun taught that morality was the foundation and the starting point of bodhisattva practice for leaving samsara behind. He writes,

Yet, to be determined is not enough, he must back up his determination with right actions. The difference between a common people and a Bodhisattva is that the latter is capable of a determination to seek enlightenment and perform the deeds of a Bodhisattva.”²⁸

The bodhisattva path did not exist apart from the practice of morality.

2. The Preciousness of Human Life and the Fight Against Death (Mara)

Venerable Yin Shun advocated that a human birth, one of the six possible realms of rebirth, was extremely rare and precious,²⁹ and that the desire for blessings in a future life or a future rebirth in heaven overlooked the preciousness of human life. He writes, “Do not practice Buddhism only for the blessings in a future life. To perform such meritorious deeds as almsgiving, hoping to gain thereby a future life than the present one, is called in Buddhism,

²⁸ Venerable Yin Shun, *The Road from Man to Buddha*, 21.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

'practice with a mind to accrue.'"³⁰ Subsequently, he cautions "this should not be the ultimate purpose of following the Buddha."³¹ On the rarity of a human birth, Venerable Yin Shun recalls a popular Buddhist analogy, "The rare chance of becoming human is analogous to the chance that a blind turtle swimming in the ocean will put its head through the hole of a plank floating on a surface."³²

My second assertion is that the COVID pandemic highlights Yin Shun's reminder that we should not take our temporal existence as humans for granted. In fact, public safety measures and the advocacy for mass vaccinations heightened the reality of our earthly mortality and the threat of severe illness and death. For example, the need to wear personal protective equipment (PPE) before leaving the home was a reminder that one's life was in danger without it. Examples of PPE include face masks with varying levels of filtration, face shields and gowns, and the installing of physical barriers or partitions such as sneeze guards at counters, or point of sale locations for essential service workers such as grocery store or gas station clerks.³³ Safety equipment served as a defensive strategy, acting as a physical barrier to prevent and shield the threat of contamination, akin to a soldier who anticipates an enemy's point of entry and strategizes a way to prevent the invisible enemy (in this case, the virus) from attacking one's immune and respiratory systems.³⁴ Like a soldier who defends against oncoming threats, PPE is a tangible reminder of the invisible enemy. In the case of the pandemic, the invisible enemy is not only the virus but it is also death (*mara*), in the sense

³⁰ Ibid., 2.

³¹ Venerable Yin Shun, *The Way to Buddhahood*, 21.

³² Venerable Yin Shun, *The Way to Buddhahood*, 38.

³³ For a deeper discussion of the use of personal protective equipment during COVID, see Cook, T. M. "Personal Protective Equipment during the Coronavirus Disease (COVID) 2019 Pandemic—A Narrative Review." *Anaesthesia* 75, no. 7 (2020): 920-927.

³⁴ Ibid., 921.

that one cannot see the virus with one's naked eye; one can only see the effects of the virus. The extreme caution of fortifying oneself against death is a reminder of the fragility of life, the frailty of our mortal bodies, and the temporary nature of our momentary existence.

A bodhisattva, however, does not have enemies in terms of the self and other beings. According to the Buddha's teachings, the invisible enemy is the *mara* within oneself, brought about by self-attachment and self-serving views and actions. Po-Yao Tien shares Venerable Yin Shun's view on death, "So long as man is attached to existence through his ignorance, craving and clinging, to him death is not the final end. He will continue his career of whirling along with the wheel of existence."³⁵ He continues, "Not even the supreme Buddha could redeem them from samsara's bond. In ourselves lies the power to mould our lives."³⁶ I argue that Venerable Yin Shun's transformation of the world into a *Ren Jian Jing Tu* is possible in a pandemic through the metamorphosis of selfish views into selfless giving. The COVID pandemic reinforces the view that we cannot live in a world where we do not think about the welfare of others. The pandemic is a way of challenging our notion of self-importance, which I interpret as the Buddhist idea of self (*atman*) or self-grasping views, by calling for the removal of self-serving desires for the sake and benefit of others. Po-Yao Tien summarizes Venerable Yin Shun's view of selflessness,

Buddhism is originally in the human world, because the Buddha and his disciples wander and teach in the world very often. They would teach under any circumstance. Even when living in the mountains or forest, they will enter the village and city to beg for food, thereby making contact with the people and teaching them as the conditions ripen. To cultivate Bodhicitta action, one should do whatever that would result with the benefit of others [. . .] following the principle of

³⁵ Tien, "A Modern Buddhist Monk-Reformer in China: The Life and Thought of Yin-Shun," 96.

³⁶ Ibid.

not leaving the sentient beings and worldly matters.³⁷

Similarly, the pandemic represented an opportunity calling for an increased global movement to adopt a path of sacrificing personal desires for the sake of removing the dissatisfaction (*duhkha*) of others. The removal of *duhkha* is possible by urging individuals to reckon with the view that we are not separate embodied beings that exist independent of one another. The pandemic showed that all beings shared a mutual reality, the reality of the pandemic, and it further highlighted the reality that we are all dependent on one another, reflective of the Buddha's teaching of interdependent arising (*yuan qi*). Yin Shun writes, "No person can live alone in a society; there must be mutual dependence and support among the individuals."³⁸ The pandemic was a reminder that our actions have consequences that affect others (the law of cause and effect), and a reminder that we cannot live in this world without our mutual reliance and the concern for the mutual welfare of one another.³⁹ The pandemic is a further reminder of the duty and responsibility to care for another's well-being. In order to transform samsara into the pure land, one of the necessary criteria is to get rid of self-attached views. Strong examples of how selfish views were transformed into selflessness during the pandemic were seen by commercial businesses turning their attention to philanthropic efforts. Although such efforts were temporary, commercial enterprises transformed from a profit driven business model to a non-profit model, in order to address the global shortage of PPE-related supplies. Alcoholic beverage producers, for instance, temporarily suspended their operations in favor of manufacturing hand sanitizer, while clothing factories turned their

³⁷ Tien, "A Modern Buddhist Monk-Reformer in China: The Life and Thought of Yin-Shun," 264.

³⁸ Venerable Yin Shun, *The Basic Purpose of Following the Buddha* (Hong Kong, n.p., 1995), 16.

³⁹ Sandro Galea, "Compassion in a Time of COVID-19," *The Lancet* 395, no. 10241 (2020): 1898.

attention to stitching face masks.⁴⁰ Snowboard companies such as Burton turned their attention to producing face shields, and manufacturers of construction safety equipment changed their line of production to sewing gloves for front-line workers.⁴¹ Automobile companies such as Ford began the assembly of ventilators and respirators for COVID patients.⁴² Furthermore, all of the above mentioned manufacturers were not mandated by the government to transform their businesses.⁴³ They performed the charitable deeds on their own willingness, added costs and accord, which is one of the six characteristics of the bodhisattva perfection of charity (*dana*). On the definition of charity, Yin Shun writes, “The giving in question entails sacrificing oneself for others. Not only does this giving eradicate stinginess and greed, it eliminates attachment to ‘I and mine.’ It becomes the great sacrifice that is without attachment to self and to things.”⁴⁴ The practice of charity expanded beyond the commercial sectors. At the international level, wealthier nations, for example, donated supplies of face masks and later vaccines to third world countries.⁴⁵ In Canada, for instance, fast food chains such as McDonald’s and Tim Hortons cooperated with the government to distribute face masks to the public.⁴⁶ I claim that the rare occurrence of for-

⁴⁰ Megan Cerullo, “How Companies Pivoted from Making Dresses, Snowboards and Whisky to Face Masks, Gloves and Sanitizer,” *CBS News*, March 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ppe-manufacturing-business-transformations/>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Venerable Yin Shun, *The Way to Buddhahood*, 227.

⁴⁵ For data about the donation of vaccines to third world countries, see Mathieu, Edouard, Hannah Ritchie, Lucas Rodés-Guirao, Cameron Appel, Charlie Giattino, Joe Hasell, Bobbie Macdonald et al. “Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19),” *Our World in Data*, 2020, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>. The data is updated on a daily basis.

⁴⁶ Craig Ryan, “COVID-19 Masks Now Available to Albertans at Select Drive-Thrus,” *CBC News*, June 2020, [https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/covid-](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/covid-19-masks)

profit businesses transforming their focus to a charity model and coordinating with the government to distribute free goods for the public welfare of society, could be seen as a major contribution to Venerable Yin Shun's transformation of samsara into the *Ren Jian Jing Tu*.

3. Metaphorical Interpretation of Vaccines and the Embodiment of Wisdom

I argue that the final conversion of the human realm into the *Ren Jian Jing Tu* is achieved through the transformation of ignorant views to wisdom (*prajna*), which is the last of the six perfections of the bodhisattva path. Master Sheng Yen explains the characteristics of wisdom,

One need not escape from one's body and mind to gain liberation, this is liberation itself. There is no need to escape to another world in order to gain liberation...If we can remain in samsara and still be liberated, that would be the bodhisattva ideal.⁴⁷

Based on my interpretation, the vaccine and the attempt to vaccinate the global population is a metaphor for the process of first, gaining knowledge about the causes of *duhkha*, and then second, by embodying wisdom. Before shedding light on the parallels of the vaccine with the Buddhist transformation of ignorance to wisdom, I will briefly summarize the role of the vaccine in the defense against COVID. Within a year of the pandemic's onset, the first COVID vaccines were approved for emergency use as a way to strengthen the body's immune response and to arm one against the debilitating symptoms of the virus.⁴⁸ While the vaccines were not guaranteed to prevent one from

19-alberta-face-masks-1.5603095.

⁴⁷ Master Sheng Yen, "The Six Paramitas" (Elmhurst, Dharma Drum Publications: 2001), 49.

⁴⁸ Yvette N. Lamb, "BNT162b2 mRNA COVID-19 Vaccine: First Approval," *Drugs* 81 (2021): 495-496.

contracting COVID, it helped to reduce the severity of the symptoms.⁴⁹ The rhetoric amongst governments was that the grand cure for COVID lied in the mass vaccinations of the global population.⁵⁰ Global mass vaccination serves the purpose of saving lives, of reducing the spread of the virus, and of lightening the strain on the healthcare system and the economy.⁵¹ Promoters of mass vaccinations further claim that it increases population or herd immunity and minimizes further potential outbreaks.⁵² While double vaccinations were initially seen as the ultimate defense against the virus, additional booster shots were later seen as being even more advantageous.⁵³

I interpret the role of vaccines to be a metaphor for the Buddha's *dharma*. In the Buddha's first sermon, the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha's role in the community (*sangha*) was described as that of a doctor whose *dharma* serves as medicine to remove *duhkha*.⁵⁴ The Buddha provided the formula that *duhkha* is removed when the cause of *duhkha*, which is craving (*trnsna*), is removed.⁵⁵ Additionally, the Buddha's *dharma* was meant to be shared with others and not kept to oneself, hence the popular Buddhist expression "turning the dharma wheel." However, the Buddha's *dharma* requires time to learn,

⁴⁹ Rita Rubin, "COVID-19 Vaccines vs Variants—Determining How Much Immunity is Enough," *Jama* 325, no. 13 (2021): 1242-1243.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of the discourses on global vaccination, see Amankwah-Amoah, Joseph, and Robert E. Hinson, "COVID-19 Pandemic, Vaccine Nationalism and Counterfeit Products: Discourse and Emerging Research Themes," *Thunderbird International Business Review* 64, no. 6 (2022): 595-604.

⁵¹ Heymann, D. L., and R. B. Aylward, "Mass Vaccination: When and Why," *Mass Vaccination: Global Aspects—Progress and Obstacles* (2006): 2-3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵³ For a summary of the debate about booster shots of COVID vaccines, see Talha Burki, "Booster shots for COVID-19—the debate continues," *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* 21, no. 10 (2021): 1359-1360.

⁵⁴ Donald William Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 52.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

which takes place in the following two stages: First, one acquires theoretical knowledge.⁵⁶ Second, when knowledge is embodied, it becomes wisdom (*prajna*) which manifests in the views and actions of one's day to day life. Mitchell writes, "With this perfection of wisdom, the bodhisattva finds that in living the Dharma, he or she is free from the afflictive thoughts and emotions and the unwholesome words and actions that produce a life of suffering for oneself and others."⁵⁷ Yin Shun teaches a simile,

It is not enough for one to believe that there is water under the ground, but he must know how to dig down to the water level, and how to bring the water up onto the ground. If he does not do this, even though there is water underground, he will remain thirsty without a drop to drink.⁵⁸

For instance, a bodhisattva who has perfected the virtue of wisdom no longer perceives the world through the lens of a personal self. The benefit of embodying wisdom is that when *duhkha* ceases to exist, an individual discovers an inner joy and happiness.⁵⁹ On a similar parallel, vaccines require time to study, to research and to acquire the knowledge of its side effects on the physical body. When a vaccine is injected, it spreads within the body and one's immunity towards the Coronavirus is ideally increased. An injection which is, at first, painful is ultimately beneficial for one later. Similarly, the Buddha's *dharma* calls for the abandonment of personal cravings (*trṣṇā*), an

⁵⁶ Examples of theoretical knowledge include, according to Yin Shun, "copying the scriptures, paying homage to the dharma, giving the scriptures to others, listening attentively to other's readings and recitations, reading the scriptures on one's own, receiving and maintaining the Dharma, explaining the scriptures to others, reciting the scriptures, pondering the Dharma, and practicing the Dharma." See his *The Way to Buddhahood*, 273.

⁵⁷ Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 123.

⁵⁸ Yin Shun, *The Road from Man to Buddha*, 16-17.

⁵⁹ *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 110.

endeavor that is at first painful, yet is ultimately beneficial as it allows for the end goal of the complete cessation of *duhkha*. I claim that a vaccine, which is injected into the body, is a metaphorical parallel for Venerable Yin Shun's call for individuals to embody the body's *dharma*. When the teachings are embodied, they become a part of one's being leading to a more satisfactory view of the world made possible by transforming ignorance to wisdom (*prajna*). Yin Shun writes, "The true *prajna* is the *prajna* that is directly and personally realized through practice."⁶⁰ He explains, "Practicing means thinking deeply and discerning, with the wisdom that comes from thinking, the meaning of the Dharma."⁶¹ I interpret Venerable Yin Shun's concepts of "direct realization" and "wisdom that comes from practice" as a form of embodiment.⁶² In other words, wisdom is a metaphorical vaccine that serves as a method of immunizing one against the ills and pains of *samsara*.

It is important to clarify that public opinion about vaccinations, however, are not homogenous. The public is divided on the issue and global vaccinations created disagreements about which of the two main types of vaccines, mRNA⁶³ and viral vector vaccines⁶⁴, are more effective.⁶⁵ The

⁶⁰ Venerable Yin Shun, *The Way to Buddhahood*, 272.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 272.

⁶³ The first type, mRNA vaccines, directs the body to produce a spike protein that strengthens the body's immunity, and examples include the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines. Lamb, "BNT162b2 mRNA COVID-19 Vaccine: First Approval," 496-497.

⁶⁴ The second type, viral vector vaccines, gives instructions to one's cells to make copies of the COVID-19's protein, thus increasing the creation of antibodies in the form of white blood cells, and examples include the Johnson & Johnson, and Astra Zeneca vaccines. Duduzile Ndwandwe and Charles S. Wiysonge, "COVID-19 Vaccines," *Current Opinion in Immunology* 71 (2021): 112-113.

⁶⁵ a. Kutasi, Kristóf, Júlia Koltai, Ágnes Szabó-Morvai, Gergely Röst, Márton Karsai, Péter Biró, and Balázs Lengyel. "Understanding Hesitancy with Revealed Preferences Across COVID-19 Vaccine Types." *Scientific Reports* 12, no. 1

causes for the variations in vaccines were based on pharmaceutical groups and scientists conducting lab studies independent of one another to produce a vaccine as quickly as possible.⁶⁶ Opinions on the two types of vaccines led to factions in public opinion about which was better, causing shortages of one of the two types of vaccines, depending on the country, believed to have a higher effectiveness.⁶⁷ Subsequently, in some cases, less popular vaccines were donated to third world countries on the basis of avoiding the wasteful expiration of the vaccines, in some cases.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the topic of vaccination is a polarizing topic and a third faction popularly known as anti-vaxxers, who are strongly opposed to the quick production of vaccines, emerged. Their resistance to taking the COVID vaccination was caused by anxiety and uncertainty about the long term and possibly irreparable side effects of vaccines, since the emergency need for COVID vaccines by-passed the typical decade-long period of research.⁶⁹ The strong opposition towards

(2022): 1.

b. There are 4 types of COVID vaccines, the other two being whole virus vaccines and nucleic acid vaccines. For a brief summary of their differences, see "COVID-19 Vaccines," 111-113.

⁶⁶ Ewen Callaway, "Coronavirus Vaccines." *Nature* 580 (2020): 576-577.

⁶⁷ Kristóf Kutasi et al. found a correlation between preferences for vaccines in Hungary and public discourse, summarized as follows: "Believers of conspiracy theories are more likely to evaluate the mRNA vaccines (Pfizer and Moderna) unacceptable. Those who follow the advice of politicians are more likely to evaluate vector-based (AstraZeneca and Sputnik) or whole-virus vaccines (Sinopharm) acceptable." See Kristóf Kutasi et al., "Understanding Hesitancy with Revealed Preferences Across COVID-19 Vaccine Types," *Scientific Reports* 12, no. 1 (2022): 1.

⁶⁸ Oxfam, "Donating Unwanted Vaccine Doses should not be Part of Already Stretched Aid Budgets," *Oxfam International*, February 2022, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/donating-unwanted-vaccine-doses-should-not-be-part-already-stretched-aid-budgets>.

⁶⁹ Takunda Matose, "The Anti-Vaxxer as a Moral Equal: Democracy, Legitimation, and Violence," *Philosophy Today* 67, no. 1 (2023): 55.

vaccination was further exacerbated by government and workplace mandated vaccinations for employees, causing global anti-vaccination rallies, riots and protests.

Similar to the polarizing topic of public opinion on vaccinations, factions within the monastic community (*sangha*) also developed following the death of the historical Buddha. I will briefly elaborate on the causes of disagreement in the early history of the Buddhist community before sharing my reflection on how the bodhisattva practice of equanimity (*upeksha*) is, in my opinion, a parallel for instilling harmony amongst divided groups. In the early 4th century BCE, approximately a century after the Buddha's death, there were differences of opinions between monastics regarding their lifestyle.⁷⁰ For instance, there were disagreements about whether monastics could touch gold or silver, whether carrying salt in a horn broke the precept of refraining from leftovers, and whether monastics could go alms begging more than once a day.⁷¹ Though these disagreements might seem trivial by contemporary standards, they eventually snowballed into two distinct schools of thought in the 2nd century BCE, between two groups who followed the "letter of the law" and those who interpreted the "spirit of the law" established by the historical Buddha; these groups later became formally known as the Sthaviravada and Mahasamghika respectively.⁷² Based on classical retellings about the historical reason for the split, the latter Mahasamghika group was lax in their interpretation of the precepts.⁷³ An example of a "spirit of the law"

⁷⁰ See footnote 2 of Charles Willemsen, Bart Dessein, and Collett Cox's, "Introductory Remark," in *Sarvāstivāda Buddhist Scholasticism* (Brill, 1998), xvi.

⁷¹ Charles S. Prebish, "Buddhist Councils and Divisions in the Order," ed. Charles Prebish, *Buddhism, a Modern Perspective* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1975), 24.

⁷² Christian Schumy, "The Arising of Mahāyāna" (Thailand: International Buddhist College, 2014), 7.

⁷³ Rahula Walpola, "Theravada-Mahayana Buddhism," *Gems of Buddhist wisdom, Buddhist Missionary Society, Kuala Lumpur*, 25 (2014): 2.

interpretation is that the prohibition against touching gold or silver was based on the premise that greed and the coveting of currency should be avoided. While it was possible for previous generations of monastics to function without touching gold or silver, it was challenging to follow this precept in their time and should therefore be subject to change. The “spirit of the law” faction conceded that allowances within the precepts should be made, while the second group which later became known as the Sthaviravadins, held a strict interpretation of the precepts.⁷⁴ Based on a “letter of the law” interpretation by the second group, the prohibition against touching gold or silver, for instance, should be upheld based on the Buddha’s explicit words.⁷⁵

I contend that within Venerable Yin Shun’s vision of a *Ren Jian Jing Tu*, factions amongst the community could be resolved through the bodhisattva perfection of equanimity. Equanimity is defined as the principle of treating all beings as equal to oneself; this is not to say that there are no social, class or economical distinctions between individuals but the bodhisattva is not troubled or held back by such distinctions because the bodhisattva only thinks about benefiting others and does not think of oneself. Yin Shun explains, “equanimity is a mental equilibrium toward all beings, without a biased love for one’s relatives or a discriminatory hatred of one’s enemies.”⁷⁶ Thus, there are no factions or conflicts within the mind of the bodhisattva due to their perfection of the virtue of equanimity. Through equanimity, the factions regarding vaccinations could be resolved, transforming samsara into Venerable Yin Shun’s vision of a *Ren Jian Jing Tu*. Equanimity does not

⁷⁴ Rahula Walpola, "Theravada-Mahayana Buddhism," 2.

⁷⁵ I have provided a classical retelling of the historical reasons for the split between the monastic sangha following the Buddha’s death. However, Charles Prebish has challenged this classical accounting in his analysis of the early Buddhist scriptures of both groups. For a detailed investigation of the reasons for the split, see Janice J. Nattier and Charles S. Prebish’s "Mahāsāṃghika Origins: The Beginnings of Buddhist Sectarianism," *History of Religions* 16, no. 3 (1977): 237-272.

⁷⁶ Venerable Yin Shun, *The Way to Buddhahood*, 98.

necessarily entail that each person has a homogenous opinion or agreement with the greater collective about vaccines, for example, but it is a principle based on the mutual respect of the other's perspective and opinion. One side speaks, the other side listens, and both sides come to an agreement in the middle. For instance, Ramona Boodoosingh et al. suggest that "the concerns of anti-vaxxers about vaccinations should also be undertaken in tandem" in the discourses about vaccines.⁷⁷

Factions are a crucial reminder that the pure land can be established when people work together towards solving a common problem because all beings share the common experience of *dukkha*. Based on the principle of equanimity, the bodhisattva sees the *dukkha* of other beings and wishes to shoulder the pain of others, even at the expense of themselves for the benefit of all beings. Though each person has their own path or method of arriving at the cessation of *dukkha*, they eventually arrive at the same end place. Venerable Yin Shun's conception of a *Ren Jian Jing Tu* was a realm that offered beings freedom from the pain of *dukkha*; in the same way, the end vision of a world plagued by the pandemic is freedom from the threat of death. Both of these visions will be discussed in the last section of this paper.

4. The Present Moment and the Disillusionment of the Digital World

The Buddhist pure land was a distant realm where sentient beings could continue to cultivate the *dharma* after death. A passage from the Small Sukhavivyuha Sutra, popularly known as the Amitabha Sutra, states:

Sariputra, if there is a good man or a good woman who hears spoken 'Amitabha' and holds the name, whether for one day, two days, three days, four, five days, six days as long as seven days, with one heart

⁷⁷ Ramona Boodoosingh, Lawal Olatunde Olayemi, and Filipina Amosa-Lei Sam, "COVID-19 Vaccines: Getting Anti-Vaxxers Involved in the Discussion," *World development* 136 (2020): 1.

unconfused, when this person approaches the end of life, before him will appear Amitabha and all the assembly of holy ones.⁷⁸

The pure land was described as a realm where the three poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance do not exist, and was seen by pure land schools of thought as a quicker place to reach the shores of enlightenment (*nirvana*).⁷⁹ Due to these qualities, the pure land became a final destination in the afterlife. Rebirth in the pure land offered a quicker path to enlightenment, which was made possible due to the purity of the environment. The pure lands originated from the mind power of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas and because the mind of a Buddha or Bodhisattva was pure, the manifested realm was free from the painful samsaric conditions of birth, old age and death.⁸⁰ In Buddhist cosmology, each Buddha or Bodhisattva had its own pure land with its own name and unique descriptions. Amitabha Buddha's pure land known as Sukhavati or "Land of Bliss," for instance, was located in the Western direction of the Buddhist map (*mandala*), while Medicine Buddha's pure land was located in the East.⁸¹ A sentient being could go to one of the many pure lands by relying on the vow or promise of a Buddha or Bodhisattva that they established an affinity with. For instance, those who single mindedly chanted the name of Amitabha Buddha could, upon death, be reborn into Amitabha's Sukhavati.⁸² Over time the Pure Land became synonymous with end of life practices⁸³ and the chanting of the Buddha's name (*nien fo*) near the moment

⁷⁸ Venerable Hsuan Hua, *The Buddha Speaks of Amitabha Sutra: A General Explanation* (Berlingame: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2013), 230.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁸⁰ Venerable Yin Shun, *The Basic Purpose of Following the Buddha*, 16.

⁸¹ *The Way to Buddhahood*, 250.

⁸² a. *Ibid.*, 248.

b. Rebirth in the Pure Land was instant due to the transference of the immeasurable amount of merit (punya) of the Buddha or Bodhisattva to an individual.

⁸³ Po-Yao Tien, "A Modern Buddhist Monk-Reformer in China: The Life and Thought of Yin-Shun," 240.

of death; hence, chanting became a popular practice amongst both lay Buddhists and monastics of the Pure Land schools. Beings who arrive at the pure land do not enter based on their own accumulation of merit or good karma, known as reliance on self-power, but they rely on their complete faith in the Buddha or the bodhisattva's vow, known as reliance on other-power.⁸⁴ A popular analogy used to explain the differences between self-power and other-power is highlighted by a human mother who carries her baby in her arms. The mother does the heavy lifting and the baby exerts no effort of its own; the mother represents the notion of other-power because the baby is completely reliant on its mother to be carried, synonymous with the idea that rebirth in the pure land is entirely dependent on the power of relying on a Buddha or Bodhisattva. The notion of self-power, on the other hand, is represented by the analogy of a baby monkey clinging to their mother's chest; the propensity for the baby monkey to cling to its mother is equated with leaving samsara through one's own active efforts and the accumulation of merit.

In contrast to the thought of Chinese pure land schools discussed above, Venerable Yin Shun states that the goal of seeking a final destination in a distant pure land represented a false attitude towards Buddhist practice because the goal focused on a future destination, which bypassed the importance of Buddhist cultivation in the present. Rather than actively cultivating the bodhisattva virtues of charity, morality and effort during one's

⁸⁴ In his *The Way to Buddhahood*, Yin Shun writes, "Relying on the faithful vow to enter the Buddha Way is a doctrine in which one depends on another's power" (248). According to the Amitabha Buddha Pure Land Sutra, those who chanted Amitabha Buddha's name with a focused mind for days could, upon death, be immediately reborn into the Pure Land. *The Way to Buddhahood*, 248. Also see my work, "The Practice of Yin Shun's Ren Jian Fo Jiao: A Case Study of Fu Yan College, Dharma Drum Mountain and Tzu Chi Buddhist Compassion Relief," 17-18, for a further discussion of the Venerable Yin Shun's differences between self and other power.

lifetime, for example, devotees were missing the opportunity to do good works and to refine themselves by misplacing their focus in a future realm. Yin Shun writes “We must not waste ourselves, but should utilize what short life-span allocated to us in striving toward this goal—the *sunnum bonum*.”⁸⁵ While Venerable Yin Shun does not deny that the pure land path will eventually lead to Buddhahood, as all paths will eventually lead to Buddhahood, it is not the direct path.⁸⁶ He asserted that the direct path to Buddhahood was dependent on diligent practices in the here and now. For example, he referred to practices such as chanting the Buddha’s name (*nien fo*) as a form of convenient practice (*fang bian fa*).⁸⁷ A convenient practice is an indirect method that attracts individuals to the doors of Buddhism at a particular moment in time; the practices, however, only play a peripheral role in encouraging one’s faith in the Buddha’s teaching and they do not represent the direct path to Buddhahood. An example of a convenient practice can be highlighted by the analogy of using a finger to point someone in the right direction; upon reaching their destination, however, the finger is no longer needed because the individual is no longer lost. If the person continues to rely on the finger, it will serve no purpose to them. In this way, Venerable Yin Shun advocated the need to reorient one’s focus from the distant pure land to the *Ren Jian Jing Tu*.

I interpret the internet realm created by computer generated texts and images as a metaphorical symbol for the distant pure land that Venerable Yin Shun rejected. Before elaborating on my reflection of the trope parallels between the internet realm and the distant pure land realm, I will briefly expand on the nature and characteristics of the reliance on the internet during the COVID pandemic, and compare descriptions between the internet realm and the pure land. Due to government mandates, the number of visitors in public enclosed spaces such as businesses and religious institutions, for

⁸⁵ Venerable Yin Shun, *The Road from Man to Buddha*, 13.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁸⁷ Po-Yao Tien, “A Modern Buddhist Monk-Reformer in China: The Life and Thought of Yin-Shun,” 236.

example, were restricted.⁸⁸ As stated earlier in the paper, in-home gatherings were reduced to a defined number of close contacts, and schools and post-secondary institutions transitioned from in-person teaching to online platforms. When face to face meetings and gatherings were restricted, this resulted in a global shift to virtual ways of connecting with one another, of attempting to maintain business as usual, of maintaining an online classroom, and most importantly, to allow people in isolation to connect with one another. Whether through online video platforms such as Google Meets and Zoom or through phone video messaging or instant message apps such as Facetime, Whatsapp or LINE, for instance, the internet became the avenue for people to communicate with one another. The virtual world is a disembodied realm; on conference meeting platforms, the 2-dimensional images and figures only show a facade or glimpse of disembodied torsos, resembling the fantasy-like descriptions of the pure land mentioned in the Shorter Sukhavativyuha Sutra, for instance. Amitabha's Pure Land is described as having "seven tiers of railings, seven layers of netting, and seven rows of trees, all formed from the four treasures and for this reason named 'ultimate bliss.'"⁸⁹ It also "has pools of the seven jewels, filled with the waters of eight meritorious virtues. The bottom of each pool is pure, spread over with golden sand."⁹⁰ In Venerable Master Hsuan Hua's scriptural commentary, the jewels are manifested through the "ten thousand virtues" of Amitabha Buddha.⁹¹

⁸⁸ In countries such as Canada, the maximum allowable number of people permitted in an enclosed public space was determined by reducing the percentage of people based on fire occupancy codes. See Government of Canada's "Building Management Direction for Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)," Government of Canada, last modified April 2023, <https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/modernizing/hybrid-work/guidance-messages-covid-19/building-management-covid-19.html>.

⁸⁹ Venerable Hsuan Hua, *The Buddha Speaks of Amitabha Sutra: A General Explanation* (Burlingame: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2013), 195.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 208.

While Venerable Yin Shun did not reject the reality of the distant pure land, he claimed the sole goal of seeking rebirth in the pure land was not the direct path to Buddhahood; the pure land is in the here and now. In his vision of a *Ren Jian Jing Tu*, he emphasized the present nature of the pure land; it is not a destination only reached at death. Metaphorically speaking, the virtual world of online meetings and connections is a parallel to the distant pure land, which does not convey the reality of the world. According to the Amitabha Sutra, everything that one wishes can be instantly manifested in the pure land as there is limitless wealth and jewels in the form of “gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, mother-of-pearl, red pearls and carnelian” in the Land of Bliss.⁹² Similarly, e-commerce platforms such as Amazon can instantly deliver the heart's desired items to one's front doorstep. With the click of a button, virtual backgrounds of mountainscapes or serene beaches can instantly transport meetings to exotic locations, and wrinkles and facial imperfections can disappear in a flash with digital filters. In the pure lands, there is no aging and beings maintain their youthfulness. Likewise, in the digital realm of online gaming, individuals can take on the appearance of any avatar that they choose, and dead video game characters can die and come back to life endlessly. Ambience videos can transform family rooms into a coffee shop replete with background sounds of conversing customers. In the Western Pure Land, there are birds such as swans, peacocks and parrots but the birds were not born there due to their karmic retribution; rather they were manifested from the heart of Amitabha Buddha.⁹³ In the same way, the images trapped in the virtual screen are manifested through our heart's desires and imaginations. The virtual world has no tangible reality; the pixelated heads, muffled voices and buffering delays are reminders that the virtual world is only an illusion. It is a realm that favors the youth generations with knowledge of technological how-tos and with access to internet, and excludes the elderly and those with accessibility

⁹² Venerable Hsuan Hua, *The Buddha Speaks of Amitabha Sutra: A General Explanation*, 203.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 213-215.

issues.⁹⁴ Venerable Yin Shun's advocacy to turn away from the focus of rebirth in a distant pure land can serve as a reminder of the need to see through the enchantment and illusion of artificial realities.

I am not denying the convenience and positive benefits of the internet. During the pandemic, the internet brought the sangha together in some communities through the broadcasting of online prayers and guided meditations, who otherwise would not have been able to meet in person.⁹⁵ Through messaging apps such as Whatsapp or LINE, for instance, some virtual *sanghas* have not only been able to maintain instant communication but the internet has enabled them to quickly immobilize dharma activities such as chanting sessions and online conferences, broadcasting them globally. I assert that the internet can be a form of convenient practice (*fang bian*) as defined by Venerable Yin Shun that can serve to benefit the global community and can have suitable applications at a given time. However, when the internet is used for the sole reasons of attempting to return to some former view of pre-pandemic normalcy or of attempting to fast forward to a future vision of freedom, these views ignore the present reality. I claim that this view is parallel to Venerable Yin Shun's advice to steer clear of distant realities either in the past or the future.

The immaterial reality of the internet realm cannot convey the authenticity of the here and now. Like Venerable Yin Shun's view of the distant pure land, the internet realm blurs the lines between the present and a dream world. In a pandemic world, the need to confront one's present reality, that of death, is eclipsed by a greater future desire to return to normalcy. Normalcy is understood through Predrag Cicovacki and Natacha Salomé Lima's

⁹⁴ Gabrielle Martins Van Jaarsveld, "The Effects of COVID-19 among the Elderly Population: A Case for Closing the Digital Divide," *Frontiers in psychiatry* (2020): 1-2.

⁹⁵ For a discussion of the online sangha and its challenges, see Liz Kineke's "Together Alone: Online Sanghas in the Age of Social Distancing," *Tricycle*, March 2020, <https://tricycle.org/article/online-sanghas/>.

framework. They state, “the idea of a normal state of affairs should also take into account its twin counterpart concept of a pathological state” or what is considered an anomaly or abnormal.⁹⁶ They continue on the contextual nature of what is considered normalcy,

For the vast majority of ordinary people, however, the values we accept are a mixture of these two extreme approaches; in some situations we rely more on the past and our experience of it, at other times we give precedence to what has never been but which we could envision as a far more desirable state of affairs than our reality. For most of us and most of the time, the two senses of ‘normal’ are simply mixed up.⁹⁷

Cicovaki and Lima explain that what people consider to be normal is to be free from unfavorable conditions with the following analogy,

Moreover, there is an expectation that everyone should be entitled to clean water and unpolluted air, just as all of us hope to be healthy; we are prone to think of them as our rights, not as our privileges: being healthy, having clean water, and unpolluted air - and not their opposites - is what is normal, however widespread or persistent such unfavorable conditions may be. What is now, or what has been the case in the past, does not and should not determine how things ought to be. It is just the other way around: the “ought” is prescriptive for the “is,” regardless of whether that “ought” has ever been realized in practice.⁹⁸

Consequently, the awareness of the present moment is overshadowed by

⁹⁶ Predrag Cicovacki and Natacha Salomé Lima, "Our Common Post-Covid-19 Pandemic Future: A Return to ‘Normal’ or a Creation of the New ‘Normal’?," *Ethical Thought* 22 (2022), 114.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 118-119.

⁹⁸ Cicovacki and Lima, “Our Common Post-Covid-19 Pandemic Future,” 119.

lamenting the past or seeking a future vision. By clinging to the past or to the future, an individual misses the opportunity to see the present moment. Cicovacki and Lima beg the question “should we not try to approach our future and what we consider ‘normal’ in a different way?”⁹⁹ They claim that normalcy in a pandemic is understood as the aspiration for health; however, they advise, “Instead of talking about health as our right, one thing that we can learn from our present Covid-19 pandemic is that being healthy is more a privilege than a right.”¹⁰⁰ Being present in a pandemic could refer to the ability to confront one’s emotions around death, to acknowledge one’s fears, and to accept the impermanence of life. By living in the present, and not the past or the future, it leads to a more authentic way of being, in the sense that one is not controlled by one’s fears, not rejecting the present reality or setting expectations and conditions for a future reality that has yet to happen. Cicovacki and Lima assert that the new normal should be perceived as a reality in which “we are all glad to be healthy, and it is a joy, nor any entitlement, to be so.”¹⁰¹ This perception of the new normal can be supported by Venerable Yin Shun statement, “Although the perfect reward land is universally everywhere, only when sentient beings’ wisdom increases do they perceive that anyplace can be a perfect Pure Land in an instant.”¹⁰²

I claim that *dukkha* arises from holding onto a sense of normalcy and setting parameters based on previous conditions or ways of living. In the same way that the Buddha taught that all life is impermanent and the key to leaving *samsara* is to accept impermanence,¹⁰³ the pandemic forced the global population to reckon with the reality of death and the impermanent nature of

⁹⁹ Ibid., 121.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 122.

¹⁰¹ Cicovacki and Lima, “Our Common Post-Covid-19 Pandemic Future,” 122.

¹⁰² Venerable Yin Shun, *The Way to Buddhahood*, 355.

¹⁰³ Venerable Yin Shun summarizes the Buddha’s teachings on impermanence as follows, “All things, from human beings to the earth they live in, are changing constantly. All these are not permanent and are not the final entity.” *The Road from Man to Buddha*, 14.

life. I claim that the desire for rebirth in a distant pure land can be expressed as an ultimate longing for freedom; freedom from the conditions of *duhkha*, freedom from the limitations of aging and sickness, and ultimately from cyclical death. In the same way, I interpret the future vision of returning to normalcy during the pandemic as a trope for humanity's ultimate wish for freedom; freedom to come and go as one pleases, freedom over the autonomy of one's body, and freedom from the fear of imminent death. Cicovacki and Lima's discussion highlights the trope of freedom, "It is a privilege not simply granted or given to us, either by God or by the government. Rather, it is something that requires our steadfast commitment, as well as a bit of luck."¹⁰⁴

In this paper, I have made four claims that can be summarized as follows: 1) Venerable Yin Shun's vision of a *Ren Jian Jing Tu* is achieved on the foundation of the bodhisattva virtue of morality, along with the motive of putting aside one's personal desires for the greater good of humanity. 2) The pandemic is a reminder of the fragility of life and the temporary nature of our momentary existence, parallel to Venerable Yin Shun's emphasis that rebirth in the human realm is rare and should be cherished. 3) Vaccines are a metaphorical parallel for the need to embody the *dharmā*. When the teachings are embodied, ignorance is transformed to wisdom (*prajna*), which immunizes one against the ills and pains of samsara. 4) The internet realm is a metaphorical symbol for the distant pure land that Venerable Yin Shun rejected, and the need to be free from its illusory grip lies in being mindful of the present moment. With the removal of lockdowns and the majority of COVID restrictions such as the limitations of social gatherings, the need to wear face masks, the order to work from home, and the need to vaccinate being lifted, for example, there are varying opinions about the status of the COVID pandemic and whether it is considered to be over.¹⁰⁵ In May of 2023, the

¹⁰⁴ Cicovacki and Lima, 122.

¹⁰⁵ While a discussion about the pandemic, endemic and epidemic status of COVID is beyond the scope of this paper, see Antia, Rustom Antia and M. Elizabeth Halloran's "Transition to Endemicity: Understanding COVID-19," *Immunity* 54, no. 10 (2021): 2172-2176, for a dialogue on the transition of the status of COVID.

World Health Organization (WHO) removed the state of public health emergency globally ¹⁰⁶; however, the WHO continues to regard COVID as a pandemic and reported one million new cases in the last month (June, 2023).¹⁰⁷ Regardless of the present status of COVID, the pandemic made an impact on every individual. In spite of the status of COVID and though COVID is not at the forefront of public topics of conversation, the trope theme of death serves as a remnant reminder that continues to linger in the background.

¹⁰⁶ World Health Organization, “Statement on the Fifteenth Meeting of the IHR (2005) Emergency Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *World Health Organization*, May 2023, [https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-\(2005\)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-19\)-pandemic](https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-19)-pandemic).

¹⁰⁷ World Health Organization, “Weekly Epidemiological Update on COVID-19 29 June 2023 (Edition 149),” *World Health Organization*, June 2023, <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/weekly-epidemiological-update-on-covid-19---29-june-2023>.

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