

PHILANTHROPY

BEYOND ZEN

Tsz Shan Monastery combines traditional design with modern architecture to embody a self-cultivating philosophy that manifests itself through engagement with the local and global community.



bell rings and a hush falls over the faithful. Nestled in the calm greenery of Hong Kong, the Tsz Shan Monastery provides a serene reminder to visitors to calm themselves and contemplate the ineffable.



CONCEPTION

"Twelve years ago, before the design process started, Mr Li Ka-shing already had in mind what he wanted the monastery to be. He wanted it to be more for the suffering people of Hong Kong. He felt that there is no refuge for us, and if given a place to calm down, relax ... at least, we can be at peace with ourselves," explains Professor Ho Puay-peng of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, overseer of the design of the monastery.

"Society is ... topsy-turvy in a way, everything is upside down. That vision is increasingly applicable to society. In that regard, that is the primary aim of Mr Li with the monastery - to create a 'pure land' in Hong Kong," he says, alluding to the beautiful spiritual realm conducive to achieving enlightenment.

"The second motive of Mr Li is that he wanted a monastery that can become a centre of learning for Buddhism. So the emphasis on education is another particular aspect of this monastery," explains Professor Ho.

THE PREMISES

The project occupies an impressive 46,764 square metres on a hillside overlooking an idyllic village and the waters of Plover Cove. The premises encompass several buildings housing a variety of halls, facilities and residences for the monks. The Guan Yin (Avalokiteśvara) statue, casting her gaze over the monastery, is the second tallest bronze Guan Yin statue in the world. It is covered with white fluorocarbon paint, a material also used to coat rockets, which incorporates technology that enables the statue to wash itself with falling rain.

"The choice of location and the whole design have to help create a sense of empathy within everybody so that we can relate to the site, the building and Buddhist teachings," explains Professor Ho. "We wanted to use the best techniques and materials available today as a mark of respect for the Buddha and for propagating the teachings. The materials used are of the highest quality to honour Buddhism and ensure durability, a form of offering to the Buddha."

Regarding the materials used, Tsz Shan Monastery builders focused on details rather than worldliness. The padauk wood for the halls, now rarely found in Asia,



Modern architecture meets ancient tradition.



falter under the heat of Hong Kong's intense summers. All levels are accessible by lifts, opening the space to those with impaired mobility so that they can also experience the journey to the Buddha. However, in all cases, visual integrity was preserved through the use of traditional materials and motifs.

"All the spaces are orchestrated in the sense that you move from one room to another room, one building to another building, and one courtyard to another courtyard, and finally to the presence of the Buddha ... We are able to take advantage of the landscape and raise up the terraces so as you go up the steps and turn around, you see the surroundings," Professor Ho says. "Every space has meaning to help your cultivation before coming into the sacred hall."

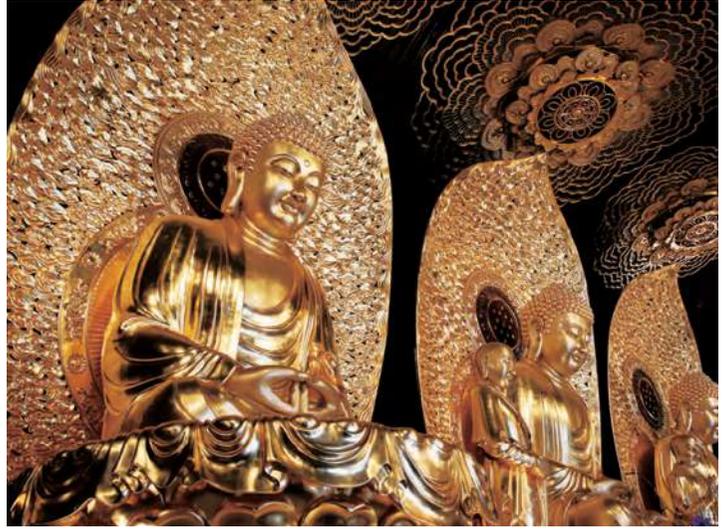
SPIRITUAL COUNSELLING

Beyond the metaphysical side of the religion, Tsz Shan Monastery actively engages with the community to soothe

the dispirited with Buddhist compassion and wisdom. This engagement, according to Buddhist teachings, is an important step towards achieving salvation for all sentient beings. Back in the tumultuous city, the Buddhist Spiritual Counselling Centre of the monastery is dedicated to assisting those with emotional issues and helping them achieve happiness.

The Centre is a pioneer in providing free-of-charge counselling services that incorporate Buddhist teachings. The Dharma Therapy, in particular, is the first of its kind in Hong Kong. The therapy focuses on one's spiritual growth and relationship with the inner self. It adopts a six-step approach to know your inner self, to shape it, and to liberate it from grudges.

"We aim to bring Buddhist values down to earth through professional counselling services ... Through Dharma Therapy counselling, we aim to assist people to gain a deeper understanding of themselves



by integrating Buddhist wisdom into their daily lives," says Dr Jennifer Yim Shui-wa, who is in charge of the Centre. "Our professional team comprises registered social workers and certified counsellors of the Hong Kong Professional Counselling Association. In addition, we are endeavouring to build a training and accreditation centre for Dharma therapists through partnerships with the Centre of Buddhist Studies, the University of Hong Kong and multidisciplinary professionals."

The Centre also provides different spiritual wellness programmes and training courses. A total of 12,155 working hours between April 2015 and September 2016 was dedicated to delivering tailor-made programmes and services to the community, with over 5,700 people participating. More importantly, it is open to people of all religious backgrounds. "In fact, only about 32 per cent of those seeking our counselling services are Buddhists," says Dr Yim.

ENLIGHTENMENT AND EMPOWERMENT

The Counselling Centre is a place for people with particular spiritual needs. Tsz Shan Monastery programmes, meanwhile, focus on self-realisation of the wider public through enlightenment.

Led by the Venerable Thong Hong, Abbot of the monastery, and a team of 15 monastics supported by lay teachers, the monastery's education team has developed programmes to accommodate different age groups and backgrounds. In addition to the more traditional meditation classes and tea appreciation, the Venerable Thong Hong and his team also came up with creative ideas to adapt to modern phenomena. For example, there are seminars designed for doctors, teachers and professionals who serve people with special needs. The monastery also holds reading clubs and chanting groups. It organises day tours for primary school children, summer camps for secondary

school students, cultural exchange camps for university students, and spiritual retreats - including chocolate Zen training!

"The primary goal is to give participants a way to calm down, be at peace with themselves and ultimately achieve self-realisation. Even with modern means of connecting with people, the underlying rationale has not changed," says the Venerable Thong Hong.

The same adhesion to core Buddhist principles applies to the water offering, a unique practice adopted by the monastery to replace incense offerings to pay tribute to Guan Yin. "The method, while being environmentally friendly, reminds people of their innate connection with nature and the essence of life by irrigating the plants in the monastery with the water offered," the Venerable Thong Hong says.

To avoid disturbing both the peaceful ambience and nearby villagers, there is



Ancient beliefs, modern engagement. The monks are on the hills, in the city and in the hearts of Hong Kong.

a daily limit of 400 public visitors, and around 200 additional places offered to local non-governmental organisations. On special occasions, the gate will also be opened to larger groups of adherents. By October 2016, after receiving the public for more than a year, the monastery had hosted more than 400,000 visitors and programme participants.

“The ambience is crucial to our beliefs since we encourage teaching Buddhist values through the surrounding atmosphere,” the Abbot says, echoing Professor Ho. “But the ambience is also generated from your inner self and changes accordingly; that is why we also stress the enlightenment of oneself.”

The Venerable Thong Hong explains that the monastery is also about empowerment, and its 800-strong volunteer community demonstrates that idea. It aims to promote the ideal of “virtuous living” – to study the Dharma while putting learning into

practice. “While we welcome people of all ages to become a member of our volunteer family, many of them are retired persons. They are happy to have the opportunity to rediscover their self-worth,” he says.

A BELL RINGS OUT TO BLESS MANKIND

The 2015 New Year’s Eve Bell Ceremony event was attended by some 1,500 participants. While the outside world was raucously celebrating the countdown, the people at the monastery turned the festivity into silent blessings for all mankind and the universe as the bell rang at midnight.

Whether engaging with the monks and counsellors in the heart of Hong Kong or considering the generous countenance of Guan Yin in the countryside, the faithful and the curious find that the Tsz Shan Monastery brings a deep spiritual boon to those seeking peace in a hectic world. □

INITIATION

The Tsz Shan Monastery project was initiated in December 2003 by Mr Li Ka-shing. At the height of Hong Kong’s economic hardship during the SARS scare, Mr Li wanted to turn his passion and dedication to Buddhism and Dharma into a monastery built for those seeking peace in a frantic world. The Most Venerable Kok Kwong, the late president of the Hong Kong Buddhist Association, agreed to take on the position as Chairman of the Board of the monastery after hearing the proposal from Mr Li.

The project was fully financed by the Li Ka Shing Foundation. Up to 2015, Mr Li had contributed more than HKD2 billion through his personal foundation for the development and operation of the monastery.

