

The 38th Niwano Peace Prize Awarded to the Venerable Shih Chao-hwei of Taiwan

This year, the 38th Niwano Peace prize will be awarded to the Venerable Shih Chao-hwei of Taiwan in recognition of her work in peace building through her safeguarding of all forms of life, her promotion of gender ethics, gender equality and her approach to open-minded dialogue with different religious leaders and social groups. It is the view of the Niwano Peace Prize Committee that, grounded in her Buddhist faith, she provides fearless leadership in the promotion of a sustainable and viable peace, and as such we are honoured to recognise her work.

Born in 1957 in Yangon, Myanmar, Venerable Shih Chao-hwei moved to Taiwan in 1965. She was ordained in 1978. Leading a full academic life, she teaches Religious Studies at Hsuan Chuang University, where she is currently a professor, and serves as the Dean of Graduate Studies at Hong Shih Buddhist College. In 2004 she founded Hsuan Chuang's Research Centre for Applied Ethics. She is also the founder of the Life Conservationist Association, which lobbies for animal rights legislation. She received the 48th Chinese Literature and Arts Medal for her outstanding contributions to cultural debates. She was also awarded the International Outstanding Women in Buddhism Medal in 2009, and The Person of the Year Prize for social movements in 2012. Together with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, she has been appointed as the spiritual mentor and patron of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), founded by the renowned Thai Buddhist reformer, Sulak Sivaraksa. The Ven. Shih Chao-hwei is the author of over 31 books and over 77a research papers, including numerous manuscripts on nature conservation.

In line with the objectives of the Niwano Peace Prize to be rooted in faith, the Committee notes the Ven. Shih Chao-hwei's commitment to her Buddhist faith as a means to strengthen herself, her community, and her work. Viewing Buddhism as more of a profound philosophy than simply a religion, it is the foundation of her activism. Her viewpoint and participation in social movements is supported by moral studies and ethical discourse rooted in her studies of Buddhist ethics. In addition, she works with others from diverse social and even ideological backgrounds, working with pastors, priests, and monastics on the long, and challenging road of social change. Whilst the activism is inspired by her Buddhist faith, she sees that activism enables a practice that transcends beyond winning and losing, and indeed transcends the Self. She regards the fluid and changing circumstances of activism as a means of Buddhist practice to liberate the self from pain. The Committee notes her deep and profound commitment where her faith inspires activism, and activism becomes a practice by which her faith is developed.

An effective activist, Ven. Shih Chao-hwei has successfully campaigned on a wide range of issues including gender equality, animal rights, and nuclear power, amongst other issues.

Her work on animal rights includes facilitating the legislation of the 'Wildlife Conservation Act' and the 'Animal Protection Act' promoting the Buddhist practice to care for all sentient beings. She also ran a campaign to ban gambling on horses in Taiwan, which was successfully pushed through Parliament. This campaign is in line with her work on gambling, heading a coalition against gambling in Taiwan. She has campaigned against the building of casinos in economically disadvantaged Taiwanese regions, and her anti-gambling movement successfully led a referendum to stop casino construction in Penghu Island in 2009.

Her work on gender equality includes speaking out against cultural and structural violence. In 2001 she called for the abolishment of the controversial, "Eight Garudhammas" (where additional precepts are required of fully ordained Buddhist nuns above and beyond the monastic rules that applied to monks) declaring that these precepts were not codified by the Buddha

himself, and that they strongly discriminate against women. This position raised international attention towards the Buddhist gender equality movement. In 2007, she convened an international conference entitled 'Religious Culture & Gender Ethics' to widespread recognition from international academics, religious circles and feminist activists.

Ven. Shih Chao-hwei has written many articles on environmental conservation and ecological protection, human rights and issues concerning religion and politics. She is bold in expressing her opinions from the Buddhist point of view, and publishes articles in several major newspapers in Taiwan.

The Committee note the Ven. Shih Chao-hwei's courage in the face of difficulties and her preparedness to give voice to controversial topics. We note that whilst she may feel fear, she also faces up to fear, calling it "the foremost enemy in one's life." She recognises that true peace of mind does not come from remaining silent or ignoring an issue, but rather by confronting it. We acknowledge her perspective that often there must be a breakdown of superficial harmony and serenity in order to reach deeper levels of truth and peace of mind.

It is for these reasons, and more, that the Niwano Peace Prize Committee, a group comprising distinguished scholars and religious leaders from around the world, in partnership with the Niwano Peace Foundation, are honoured to have selected the Venerable Shih Chao-hwei to receive the 38th Niwano Peace Prize.

Sarah Joseph OBE
Chairperson, the Niwano Peace Prize Committee