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Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism, Taiwan  
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Nan Tien Institute, Australia

# ON MODERNITY AND TRADITION IN HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM: FROM MASTER TAIXU TO VENERABLE MASTER HSING YUN

**Tang Zhongmao**

*Professor, East China Normal University*

## **Abstract**

Humanistic Buddhism was initially proposed by Master Taixu in early modern times, then refined in theory and verified in practice by a number of eminent monks. It now is a major ideological trend and practical model for Chinese Buddhism in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao. Fo Guang Shan in Taiwan, under the leadership of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, has brought the model of Humanistic Buddhism development worldwide. This has become an important channel for Chinese culture to the world. How is it that Humanistic Buddhism has become a major Buddhist ideological trend on the Chinese mainland? How has it become the way for Buddhism to modernize and to survive? Humanistic Buddhism not only responds to the practical needs of this era, but it is rooted in long-standing Buddhist spiritual traditions and the Buddha's original intents. In other words, it is precisely that Humanistic Buddhism has succeeded in "remain adaptable, yet unchanged" and "remain unchanging, yet adapt to circumstances," as well as closely linking the Buddha's original intents with practical ways of living in real social circumstances based on the differing aptitudes and needs of devotees. In academic terms, Humanistic Buddhism, in this modern era, has actualized the integration of "modernity" and "tradition." As a result, traditional Buddhism developed a modern feel and vitality. Venerable Master Hsing Yun provided an incisive explanation of Humanistic Buddhism, saying, "What the Buddha taught, what is essential to human beings, what purifies, and what is virtuous and beautiful. All teachings that benefit a happy life belong to Humanistic Buddhism." In fact, this explanation accurately summarizes the "modernity" and "tradition" of Humanistic Buddhism. "What the Buddha taught" expresses the "tradition" of Buddhism, and "what is essential to human beings" comprises the "modernity." This paper discusses the "modernity" and "tradition" of Humanistic Buddhism through the historical development of Humanistic

Buddhism from Master Taixu to Venerable Master Hsing Yun.

**Keywords:** Humanistic Buddhism, Venerable Master Hsing Yun, modernity, tradition, transcendence

## **1. The Context of Modernity in which Taixu Proposed Humanistic Buddhism**

“Modernity” is actually a very ambiguous term. Generally speaking, it refers to characteristics of the modern (contemporary) time beginning with the Age of Enlightenment in the West. The term also represents the consciousness of the present vis-à-vis prior periods. As a general description of the modern phenomenon, modernity involves the disciplines of philosophy, history, sociology, psychology, aesthetics, and others. Depending on the perspective of these different disciplines, the definition of the “modern” period varies.

Historians often regard either the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, or the Age of Discovery as marking the advent of modernity. In philosophy, people often relate Descartes’ statement “I think, therefore I am” (subjectivity) in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to modernity. However, scholars studying the history of social thought often consider the Age of Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the true beginning of modernity.

Despite the varying definitions of modernity, it formed its core content through a long process of development. It is founded upon the humanitarian ideals of historical progressivism and critical rationalism, and in turn led to the development of the principles of subjectivity, rationalism, and self-affirmation in modern society. Modernity’s philosophy of enlightenment also instituted the concepts of rationality, science, freedom, equality, democracy, human rights, and others. These concepts make up the core traits of “modern rationalism” as it developed in the recent historical period of modernity.

Modernity as the consciousness of a new age was “created” by distinguishing it from “tradition” in a dualistic “traditional/modern” narrative structure. This differentiation between the traditional and the modern led to the formation of the values and worldview of modernity. Under the influence of the concept of

modernity, people have formed radically different views from traditional ones with regard to the self, nature, society, human relationships, and the relationship between humans and nature. This has further led to a series of revolutions in the fields of science, politics, and economics, and its influence can also be felt in religion. During the modern era, the development of Chinese Buddhism unfolded under the influence of both internal and external factors, and against the backdrop of the transformations in the mode of production and relations of production in Chinese society, and the interchanges between ancient and modern schools of thought within and outside of China.

During the Ming and the Qing dynasties, the West was already confronting the issue of modernity in religion. While similar issues in Chinese Buddhism developed in their own vein, they initially developed along the lines of “Western learning” and the Western concept of modernity. With the Opium War, Chinese society faced a level of change not seen for more than three millennia and Buddhism struggled for its survival. This not only influenced people’s thoughts, but also their means of production, relations of production, and class structure.

It is under such circumstances that modern Chinese Buddhism sought its path of development. It was confronted with the circumstances of: a) the deteriorating monastic quality due to the abolition of the ordination certificate system; b) the vicious circle of hereditary temples; c) the destruction of temples during the Taiping Rebellion; and d) the rise of the “build schools on temple property” movement. All of these factors drove Buddhism to near extinction, turning it into a “religion of the dead” with the main role of monks seen as reciting sūtras for the deceased. The light of reason and wisdom that had shone in the past nearly set below the horizon. Chinese Buddhism in this period was confronted with multiple challenges, such as retention of temple property, ideological reform, finding new methods of Dharma propagation, and building new organizations.

First, in terms of its ideology, Chinese Buddhism had to adapt to and align with the new understandings and emerging concepts of modernity. Second, under the circumstances of being stripped of their temple property, Chinese Buddhists also faced the need to reform and rebuild their organizations in order to survive and modernize. The above-mentioned changes would eventually be implemented

in terms of reformation of the monastic system and the methods of Dharma propagation. Humanistic Buddhism strove to modernize both its concepts and its organizational structure in order to adapt to modern ideas and changes in modern society.

At a superficial level, Taixu's advocacy of "Buddhism for Human Life" (the predecessor of Humanistic Buddhism) was an expression of his discontentment with Buddhism that appeared to be disproportionately serving the dead, his desire to correct Chinese Buddhism's over-emphasis on death and over-reliance on reciting sūtras for the deceased.<sup>1</sup> However, his deeper motivation was to establish a strategy for Buddhism's survival in modernity by addressing the challenge at both the conceptual and systemic levels. His goal was to integrate Buddhism more with the daily life of devotees, so as to harmonize it with all aspects of modern society. To actualize his ideas of Humanistic Buddhism, Taixu instituted a series of reforms to traditional Chinese Buddhism. He proposed the "three great revolutions" of Buddhist theory (teachings), monastic organization (system) [Saṅgha], and temple economy (property).<sup>2</sup> These three areas of reform laid the foundation for broader modernization efforts such as updating folk concepts, transforming traditional ideas, reorganizing the Buddhist monastic system, and making monastic education more widely available.

On the conceptual level, Taixu's primary task was to transform the traditional Buddhist belief in ghosts and deities extant since the Ming and Qing dynasties into a Buddhism for human life and daily living. This was the very issue that Buddhism had to address in the face of modernity. In his framework of Buddhism for Human Life, Taixu planned to integrate Buddhism with Western disciplines in an effort to adapt to modern scientific thought, for instance research on Buddhism and economics, political science, mathematics, physics, and others, as well as comparative studies between Buddhism with other world religions. Taixu hoped to borrow ideas from Western science to help spread Buddhist teachings. This not only reflected the general Buddhist concept of expedient means, but also Chinese Buddhism's positive response to Western scientific and rational thinking. In the application of "Buddhism for Human Life," Taixu on the one hand reinforced the propagation of the fundamental Buddhist theory of the "human and deva vehicle" in terms of the Five Precepts and Ten Good Deeds in the human world, and on the

other hand clarified doubts and misunderstandings about academic knowledge, explaining the relationship between Buddhism and modern trends of thought and various doctrines, so as to build affinity with academia.

On the institutional level, Taixu wrote in *On the Reform of the Sangha System*, *On the Present Sangha System*, and *Outline for Establishing the Sangha*<sup>3</sup> specifically about reforming the monastic system, which is the primary focus of the “three great revolutions.” Taixu opposed abbotship and Dharma transmission systems which were heavily influenced by the traditional Chinese clan-based familial system, and was not in favor of regarding abbots as parents and disciples as children. Instead, he sought to reform the heredity system into a meritocracy. He encouraged appointing talented monks from the Buddhist academies to become the abbots of temples, to establish a just, modernized monastic institution which truly upholds the Dharma.

It is apparent that the systemic reforms advocated by Taixu were in fact aimed at the modernization of the institutions of Chinese Buddhism. He was concerned with how Buddhism, both in the religious sense of spiritual practice and teaching, and in the sense of a social organization, could be integrated into modern lives by flexible and expedient means. Taixu’s advocacy of Humanistic Buddhism in the modern period was not an isolated incident, but closely related to the broader change of direction in Buddhism at the time. In fact, since the early Qing Dynasty, even before Taixu’s promotion of Buddhism for Human Life, Chinese Buddhism had undergone major changes to its ancient traditions. These changes are outlined below.

In terms of its orientation, Buddhism transformed its traditional supramundane pursuits into proactive engagement with human lives. Buddhism’s revival was thus closely tied with that of the Chinese people, nation, and even post-republican civic consciousness. Buddhism went beyond its role as a self-liberating wisdom tradition to become of practical “utilitarian resource” for individuals and society.

In terms of the composition of Buddhists, beyond just monks, a large number of entrepreneurs, industrialists, and intellectuals had become interested

in Buddhism. They studied and practiced Buddhism, playing the roles of lay practitioners, scholars, thinkers, and even revolutionaries, bringing Buddhism into everyday social life.

In terms of Buddhist institutions, many lay Buddhist organizations were formed alongside national Buddhist institutions aimed at protecting temple property. These lay organizations began to apply rational and modern enterprise modes of management, actively propagate the Dharma through public talks, promote Buddhist culture, and engage in various social charity ventures independently from the monastic organizations.

In terms of research, there emerged a large number of Buddhist research centers and colleges which led to a voluminous amount of Buddhist periodicals and books being published. At the same time, Buddhist studies began moving away from temples into society and institutes of higher learning, and became a part of modern academia.

Looking at the changes mentioned above, there are clear signs of modernity in the rationalization and secular engagement of Chinese Buddhism that can be seen in the religious, academic, and lay Buddhist communities. This concept of modernity can be seen in three levels: 1. The influence of modern Western rational thinking and philosophical ideas on Chinese Buddhist philosophy is manifested in modern (contemporary) interpretations of Buddhism and the rational self-criticism and counter-criticism within Buddhism. 2. In terms of its view on its social role, Buddhism sought to adapt to concepts of modernity, which manifested as its catering to science and democracy, the secular engagement of lay Buddhist organizations, and the humanistic development of Buddhism. 3. In terms of research methodology, Buddhism started to apply modern academic methods in place of the traditional approach of the four stages of practice.<sup>4</sup> This change in methodology was part of Chinese Buddhism's modernization, and also served to indirectly catalyze further modernization of Chinese Buddhist studies. All of the above aspects are interrelated.

Buddhism for Human Life (which later developed into Humanistic Buddhism) as advocated by Taixu was not an isolated effort in its time, but

originated from the broader context of the modernization of Chinese Buddhism, and represents his approach to securing the survival of Chinese Buddhism in the face of modernization. It goes without saying that the promotion of Humanistic Buddhism has to a certain extent encouraged the modernization of the whole of Chinese Buddhism, as well as profoundly influenced its subsequent progress.

## **2. The Characteristics of Modernity in Venerable Master Hsing Yun's Application of Humanistic Buddhism**

Taixu died of illness at the Jade Buddha Temple in Shanghai on March 17, 1947. His personal efforts towards reforming Humanistic Buddhism did not achieve real success for various reasons. However, as his concept of Humanistic Buddhism conformed to the need to develop at the time, it gradually grew, and has become the mainstream ideology guiding the development of Chinese Buddhism today. After Taixu, Venerable Yin Shun in Taiwan developed the theory of Humanistic Buddhism. Subsequently, Zhao Puchu promoted the melding of Humanistic Buddhism with socialist development, while Venerable Master Hsing Yun took the practice of Humanistic Buddhism throughout the world, bringing new life to Chinese Buddhism.

Building on the foundations of Taixu's Buddhism for Human Life, Venerable Yin Shun further elaborated the concept of Humanistic Buddhism, embodying deep concerns for humanity within day-to-day realities. Yin Shun understood the Buddha's original intentions from a humanistic perspective, classifying Buddha-nature as part of human nature, and putting forward the Humanistic Buddhist ideal of "returning to the Buddha's true intents." The lay Buddhist Zhao Puchu continued to develop Taixu's philosophy and building on the Chinese Mind-Only School, devotedly advanced the modernization of Chinese Buddhism. In his report in the *Thirty Years of the Buddhist Association of China*, Zhao Puchu wrote, "I think that we should promote the idea of Humanistic Buddhism in the doctrines we believe in. Its basic contents include the Five Precepts, Ten Virtues, Four Means of Embracing, Six Perfections, and other general vows and practices that benefit oneself and others."<sup>5</sup>

Zhao Puchu led Chinese Buddhists in a dedicated effort to build Humanistic Buddhism. He actively promoted the Mahāyāna ideal of the bodhisattva path of liberating all beings, and advocated for the harmonious and synchronous development of Buddhism and a socialist society. This was all done in a bid to obtain developmental space for Chinese Buddhism, and to point the direction and lay out the path of modernization for Chinese Buddhism.

If we regard Taixu as the pioneer of the philosophy of Humanistic Buddhism in the first half of the twentieth century, then Venerable Master Hsing Yun of Taiwan was its developer and the great practitioner in the second half. Venerable Master Hsing Yun lives in a different era than Taixu. He adheres to the two fundamental concepts of “that which was taught by the Buddha himself” and “that which is needed by human beings.” He has engaged himself in the construction of the Fo Guang Shan model of Humanistic Buddhism which suits the needs of the times, and has progressively built up and perfected Humanistic Buddhism’s threefold training system. This model and the modern characteristics it contains are outlined below.

## **2.1 Humanistic Spirit**

The very term “Humanistic Buddhism” in English indicates an emphasis on a humanistic spirit. As mentioned above, modernity established the humanitarian ideals of historical progressivism and critical rationalism, firmly embedding the principle of human subjectivity in modern society. In the traditional understanding, there tended to be conflict between the spirit of religion and a humanistic spirit. To a large degree, the spirit of religion did away with the status and agency of humans. The concept of modernity promoted the realignment of religion and humanism.

Humanistic spirit is a universal concern for humanity. It is manifested in the pursuit of and concern for human dignity, value, and destiny. It highly values all types of spiritual and cultural phenomena. It affirms and shapes the full development of an ideal personality. This positive and affirmative attitude is in the same vein as Taixu’s idea of the “reincarnation” of Buddhism in the new form of Humanistic Buddhism. It is evidence of Humanistic Buddhism’s affirmation of

daily life. We get a deep sense of the spiritual demeanor and humanistic feelings of the monastics and Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA) members through their smiling faces and warm welcome given at all Fo Guang Shan temples. These humanistic concerns permeate the architecture, accommodation, hospitality, etiquette, and many other aspects of Fo Guang Shan.

## **2.2 Positive Affirmation**

In the words of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, "Humanistic Buddhism is that which was taught by the Buddha himself, that which is needed by human beings, that which is pure, and that which is virtuous and beautiful. All teaching that promotes the happiness of humanity represents the essence of Humanistic Buddhism." This shows that Fo Guang Shan's Humanistic Buddhism affirms happiness in daily life, the value of life, and physical health. Similarly, as expounded by the Most Venerable Hsin Bau, head abbot of Fo Guang Shan Monastery at the Eight Precepts Retreat held at Dajue Temple in Yixing, "Take care of your physical body; it is not only yours, but also belongs to your family, relatives, and others. A healthy body is the foundation to practicing on the path and to enlightenment..."<sup>6</sup> Fo Guang Shan's Humanistic Buddhism affirms people's reasonable desires and encourages them to have a positive attitude towards life. This stands in contrast to certain elements of traditional Buddhism that emphasize the afterlife instead of living in the present moment. Such negative attitudes towards life often lead to the notion that "life is short and full of suffering, so one should be reborn in the purelands and attain liberation quickly."<sup>7</sup> This neither affirms nor values human life in the present moment. In contrast, Humanistic Buddhism encourages its devotees to pursue a reasonable, pure, virtuous, and healthy life here and now, which is in line with the psychological characteristics and foundational ideals of modern people.

Fo Guang Shan temples are not luxurious, but rather clean, serene, and comfortable; the food offered need not be refined, but must be as healthy and environmentally friendly as possible. Humanistic Buddhism emphasizes keeping precepts, but not going to the extremes of ascetic practice. This positive attitude is inherited from the ideas of Taixu. Taixu explained the goals of Humanistic Buddhism, "the improvement of life, advancement of future generations,

liberation from life and death, and perfection and clarity of the Dharma Realm.”<sup>8</sup> Among them, “the improvement of life” is Humanistic Buddhism’s attitude and position towards every moment in life.

### 2.3 Spirit of Equality

Fo Guang Shan’s spirit of equality covers many aspects including gender equality, equality of monastics and laity, equality of self and others, and equality of all sentient beings. In *Hear Me Out: Messages from a Humble Monk*, Venerable Master Hsing Yun wrote:

I advocate “equality,” and I am convinced that men and women, rich and poor, etc. are all equal and none should be discriminated against. All beings possess Buddha-nature, both sentient and otherwise, and all can perfect the seeds of wisdom together. Therefore, I start with “equal human rights” then move towards “promoting the rights of all beings” in the hope of fully implementing the spirit of “equality among all beings.” Everyone should take much care of the old trees and little flowers here at the temple, show concern for the villagers and citizens outside, give encouragement to the children in the Children’s Home, comfort the elders in the Senior Home, and respect the monastic elders who founded the monastery.<sup>9,10</sup>

With regard to gender equality, Fo Guang Shan fully respects the rights and status of nuns in the Saṅgha. In the early days of Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s Dharma propagation, he was maliciously referred to as “the director of the women’s federation” because he advocated gender equality. He was unwavering. As a result of his persistence in upholding the modern spirit of gender equality, Fo Guang Shan has nurtured many outstanding nuns, unprecedented for a Chinese Buddhist organization. The ideal of equality is not only the fundamental spirit of the Buddhist philosophy of “all beings possessing the Buddha-nature,” but also that of modern ideals such as nondiscrimination, democracy, and human

rights. Fo Guang Shan members have integrated these well in their practice of Humanistic Buddhism.

## 2.4 Openness and Tolerance

Humanistic Buddhism maintains a rational stance of openness and tolerance towards modern society and all of the achievements of modern civilization, and likewise towards other Buddhist denominations and non-Buddhist religious beliefs and practices. In Venerable Master Hsing Yun's words:

Humanistic Buddhism originated from the Buddha, and has now become widespread. Therefore, the development of Fo Guang Shan and the Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA) will certainly be deemed orthodox within Buddhism. However, each to their own. In India's history there were the Theravāda and Mahāsāṃghika schools, and after spreading to China, the eight schools of Buddhism developed, each naturally differing in doctrine and practice. If they compete among them among themselves, however, this is completely out of line with the intentions of the Buddha.<sup>11,12</sup>

This shows that Venerable Master Hsing Yun's attitude toward the different schools of Buddhism is fully compatible with the ideology of "equality of the eight schools" advocated by Taixu. The Venerable Master's openness and tolerance also extend to all those within the Fo Guang Shan Saṅgha. He pointed out that even if Fo Guang disciples want to "start their own faction, we should have the magnanimity to accept the further Dharma transmission of the Fo Guang lineage, so long as it does no harm to it. We should not push them aside, but be tolerant of them."<sup>13,14</sup> Aside from this, the attitude of Venerable Master Hsing Yun and BLIA members toward other religions and folk beliefs also demonstrates their great openness and tolerance.

Annually on December 25<sup>th</sup>, the Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum holds a grand "When Buddha Meets the Gods Event." On this day, devotees of various

religions from around the world gather at the Buddha Museum to exchange their views and express their mutual understanding and respect. Such openness and tolerance towards modern societies and other beliefs has enabled Fo Guang Shan's Humanistic Buddhism to achieve the humanization, modernization, and popularization of contemporary Buddhism. It is this attitude towards other Buddhist schools and religions that allows them to peacefully coexist, progress together, and collectively establish world peace. Venerable Master Hsing Yun's attitude of openness and his advocacy of harmony and respect will have an immense influence on the future development of Humanistic Buddhism.

## **2.5 Democratic Management**

Democratic management complements the modern pursuit of democracy, and will completely change Chinese Buddhism's tradition of temple management succession. The reforms of temple economy and monastery organization in Taixu's three great revolutions are related to the management system of the Saṅgha. The "sinicization" of temple management resulted in a heredity system which reflects feudal agrarianism and traditional Confucian culture. The hereditary system practiced by temples is reflected in the lineage of the transmission of the precepts and Dharma heirs, i.e., issues such as the inheritance of temple property and leadership are resolved according to sectarian allegiances, discipleship, and seniority. Based on this hereditary system, a complex social network between temples was formed, founded upon religious kinship institutions such as tonsure, teaching tradition, and precepts taking. Therefore, Buddhist temples which originally promulgated democratic management gradually drifted into Confucian hereditary temples of various sizes, in which relationships follow the traditional pattern of a teacher and disciple.

In the late Qing period, the position of such hereditary temples among Chinese Buddhist temples continued to be deep-rooted and unshakable, and thus conservative forces protecting their vested interests and habits remained extremely strong. This explains why the various institutional reforms initiated from within the Saṅgha beginning in the late Qing period all resulted in failure. The democratic management system instituted by Fo Guang Shan is also a response to the needs of modern development, and its importance can be observed in the process of

the global development of the Saṅgha. Venerable Master Hsing Yun often says, “I am among the multitude,” and has not moved towards a kinship system or a dictatorship. At present, Fo Guang Shan has instituted the “FGS Board of Directors,” laying the organizational foundation for democratic management and policy making.

## 2.6 Living Together in Coexistence

“Living together in coexistence” is the natural result of the Buddhist teaching of dependent origination, and is also an important concept of Humanistic Buddhism put forward by Venerable Master Hsing Yun in response to the current circumstances faced by Buddhism and by humankind. “Coexistence” goes beyond equality. It creates a sense of interdependence and responsibility between people, people and society, people and nature, and between the self and others. This sense is gained through insight into the non-dual oneness of self, others, and the external world. “Living together” is more than compassion, it is Humanistic Buddhism’s “inner source of motivation.” Living together in coexistence carries forward the Buddhist spirit of unconditional compassion and reflects the modern concept of a “community of shared fate.” Living together is another important characteristic of Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s modern Humanistic Buddhism.

## 2.7 Spirit of Service

The spirit of rendering professional service can be experienced when one visits Fo Guang Shan’s temples in person. Humanistic Buddhism has made modern transformations in terms of its spirit of professional service, the dedication of its devotees, and in its conduct of various activities. Fo Guang Shan’s Humanistic Buddhism has always regarded the bodhisattva practice as the starting point of learning from the Buddha, and views Chinese Buddhism’s Four Great Bodhisattvas—*Avalokiteśvara*, *Mañjuśrī*, *Kṣitigarbha*, and *Samantabhadra*—as its role models. Venerable Master Hsing Yun called on Buddhists to turn their prayers to and respect for the Four Great Bodhisattvas into practical action by learning from and emulating them. Specifically, emulating *Avalokiteśvara*’s compassion can be done by providing convenience and service to sentient beings; *Mañjuśrī*’s wisdom can be emulated by guiding beings who have gone

astray back to the light; *Kṣitigarbha*'s vows can be emulated by spreading the Dharma into people's lives, to every family, and to all corners of the world; and *Samantabhadra*'s practice can be emulated by conforming truth to capabilities, obliging all sentient beings, and practicing what is difficult. This transformation from traditional passivity to an active spirit of professional service is the social dimension of modern Humanistic Buddhism.

### **3. The Traditionality of Humanistic Buddhism: From Taixu to Venerable Master Hsing Yun**

The “traditionality” of Humanistic Buddhism refers to its inheritance of traditional Buddhist teachings and spirit, i.e., the original intent of the Buddha. In the 2016 publication *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intent of Buddha*, Venerable Master Hsing Yun wrote that Humanistic Buddhism is the Buddha's original intent. In terms of its doctrines, not only does Humanistic Buddhism inherit from the humanistic approach of Mahāyāna Buddhism, it can also be directly traced to the original teachings delivered by Śākyamuni Buddha. It therefore covers both the temporal and geographical extent of Buddhist historiography. As such, our discussions concerning the source of contemporary Humanistic Buddhism often relate back to Mahāyāna sūtras such as the *Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch*, *Diamond Sūtra*, *Vimalakirti Sūtra*, and the *Lotus Sūtra*. Taixu, Hsing Yun, Yin Shun, and Zhao Puchu often cite the Buddhist canon in their discourses on Humanistic Buddhism. Furthermore, some eminent monks directly refer to the humanistic intent of Śākyamuni Buddha's teachings in developing this school of thought.

Prior to proposing Humanistic Buddhism, Taixu suggested that Mahāyāna Buddhism is based on the “human vehicle,” pointing out that:

The vehicle of perfect enlightenment can be summarized as the two paths of great wisdom and great compassion, which only humans have the innate ability to walk...and only these two paths can lead to perfect enlightenment, and only those with such a nature—members of the human vehicle—can practice

Mahāyāna. In other words, the human vehicle is the beginning stage for the Mahāyāna.<sup>15,16</sup>

In establishing Buddhism for Human Life (which later developed into Humanistic Buddhism), Taixu also delineated its progressive stages, and determined that it was the proper vehicle for humans and the “beginning stage for the Mahāyāna.” Subsequently, Taixu went on to relate Humanistic Buddhism to “the Dharma common to the five vehicles” and “the Dharma distinctive to the great vehicle,” positing that there is a unique path of transcendence in Humanistic Buddhism, and that it has its own stages of progression. For example, in his exchange with Liang Shuming on Humanistic Buddhism’s transcendence, he wrote:

[Humanistic Buddhism] can, at an entry level, discourage negative acts and encourage positive ones, and can increase happiness in the world through the Dharma common to the five vehicles. At an intermediate level, it can stop delusional thoughts and lead one to realize truth through the Dharma common to the three vehicles, resulting in liberation from life’s suffering. At an advanced level, it can lead to buddhahood and the wondrous enlightenment in which human nature is perfected through the Dharma distinctive to the great vehicle.<sup>17,18</sup>

Therefore, Humanistic Buddhism does not stop at the achievement of worldly stability and happiness, but eventually leads toward buddhahood and ultimate liberation.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun also often speaks of Humanistic Buddhism’s traditionality from the perspective of the humanistic features in the Buddha’s teachings. In “Building the Character of Humanistic Buddhism,” he pointed out:

The Buddha was born, practiced, enlightened, and taught the Dharma in the human realm. His entire life

manifested the character of Humanistic Buddhism. In his 49 years and over 300 teaching sessions, he spoke not to gods, ghosts, demons, or animals, but primarily to humans, and thus his teaching is already replete with the characteristics of Humanistic Buddhism.<sup>19</sup>

In the Buddhist concept of the the six realms of existence, the human world is the hub and the only realm in which enlightenment can be obtained; it is not only the sole realm in which all buddhas achieve enlightenment, but also where all the bodhisattvas propagate the Dharma.

I am of the opinion that we should understand Humanistic Buddhism at two levels—broad and narrow. Broadly speaking, Humanistic Buddhism can be understood in terms of the source of its doctrinal position, i.e., the humanistic character that has been innate in Buddhism since its founding. The narrow view understands Humanistic Buddhism from the lens of contemporary Buddhist history, and sees it as the actions of contemporary Buddhist leaders—the likes of Taixu, Hsing Yun, Yin Shun, and Zhao Puchu—in the move toward humanization and practical application of Buddhism. The innate human character of Humanistic Buddhism is not something that Taixu established (a point Taixu mentioned), but a characteristic encapsulated within Buddhism itself. In other words, a broad definition of Humanistic Buddhism does not limit it to a particular geographical region or sect. Founded upon such an understanding, Taixu’s disciple Fafang split the history of Humanistic Buddhism into four periods:

The ancient period from the time of Śākyamuni Buddha to Hīnayāna Buddhism; the medieval period of Mahāyāna Buddhism from the time of *Aśvaghōṣa* to the Sui and Tang dynasties of China; the recent period of Humanistic Buddhism, beginning with Buddhism entering Tibet and spreading throughout Asia; and the present period of Humanistic Buddhism beginning with the global Buddhist movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>20,21</sup>

According to Fafang's periods, what we call "Humanistic Buddhism" today is "the present period of Humanistic Buddhism," which is equivalent to the narrow definition of Humanistic Buddhism.

This "present period of Humanistic Buddhism" specifically refers to the modern form of Humanistic Buddhist thought and practice pioneered by Taixu, and further developed by subsequent generations of eminent Buddhists such as Hsing Yun, Yin Shun, and Zhao Puchu. This form of Humanistic Buddhist thought and practice arose out of a specific historical context, and constitutes an important trend in recent Chinese Buddhist history. It has a strong modernist flavor, and was formed through the revolution, remaking, and self-transformation of Chinese Buddhism.

It goes without saying that there are commonalities shared by Humanistic Buddhism of the modern period proposed by Taixu and that of other time periods—i.e., its humanistic and practical character and the Mahāyāna spirit of compassionately benefiting others via the Six Perfections, Four Means of Embracing, and Four Immeasurable Minds. Humanistic Buddhism also incorporates compassion, precepts, and wisdom into the practices of daily life. All of this is in line with the Buddha's original intents, and demonstrates the traditionality of Humanistic Buddhism. In Venerable Master Hsing Yun's opinion, Buddhism as originally taught by the Buddha is full of humanism. His teaching of Humanistic Buddhism includes these qualities: 1. humanism; 2. focus on daily life; 3. altruism; 4. joy; 5. timeliness; and 6. universality. As such, Venerable Master Hsing Yun summarized six Humanistic Buddhist doctrines from the Buddha's original intents, namely, the Dharma common to the Five Vehicles; Five Precepts and Ten Virtues; Four Immeasurable Minds; Six Perfections and Four Means of Embracing; causes, conditions, and effects; and Chan, Pureland, and the Middle Way.

We observe that in Venerable Master Hsing Yun's application of Humanistic Buddhism, traditional content is often expressed through the vernacular, examples include concepts such as the Three Acts of Goodness, Four Givings, and Five Harmonies. The Three Acts of Goodness refers to: Do good deeds; Speak good words; Think good thoughts, which the Venerable Master explains as:

Speaking good words is to be truthful; doing good deeds is to be virtuous; thinking good thoughts is beauty, and we should all let these three qualities of the Three Acts of Goodness take root in society. Wisdom is *prajñā*; benevolence is compassion; courage is *bodhi*, which we should all strive for, so that morality, meditative concentration, and wisdom may grow in our minds, and we practice the *bodhisattva* path as our means of cultivation in the human realm. <sup>22,23</sup>

From the perspective of the original intent of Buddhism, the Three Acts of Goodness may seem simple, but they elegantly encapsulate all the fundamental practices of the Dharma, cultivation of the body, speech, or mind. At root, all Buddhist methods of cultivation must be done with the body, speech, and mind. When applied to daily life, we use these faculties for both wholesome and unwholesome acts, which bring consequences that we ultimately must bear. This is the Buddhist principle of cause and effect. The Four Givings are: Giving others confidence; Giving others joy; Giving others hope; Giving others convenience, which represent a philosophy of generosity and the spirit of the *bodhisattva* path in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

In fact, we find many instances of this philosophy in the daily practice and teachings of Fo Guang Shan's Humanistic Buddhism. It merges the traditional spirit of Buddhism with clear and easy-to-understand vernacular, which helps devotees to understand and accept these messages. In the section "Causes of the Decline in Chinese Buddhism" in *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intents of Buddha*, Venerable Master Hsing Yun mentioned that one of the reasons for the decline was "the intimidatingly large corpus of Buddhist texts." These methods of handling the Buddha's original intent and traditional spirit of Buddhism are the outcome of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's deep consideration.

#### **4. Rationality and Transcendence in Humanistic Buddhism**

Modern Humanistic Buddhism tends towards rationality, a trait shared by the development of Chinese Buddhism and Buddhism's response to the psychological

traits of modern people. As Liu Xiaofeng wrote, “Modernity is the transformation of the mental structure of the individual/collective and in the quality and form of its cultural system.”<sup>24,25</sup> As for the issue of Humanistic Buddhism’s position on rationality and humanism, we see that it was a response to the question of how Buddhism could modernize and survive in its changing social context. In establishing Humanistic Buddhism, Taixu founded it upon the original intents of the Buddha, but also aligned it with the modern trends of rationality, humanism, and science. He was aiming at a philosophy in which the developments in Buddhism and in society could converge with core modern concepts (e.g., science, equality, democracy, and humanism).

Taking the example of the modern Humanistic Buddhism of Fo Guang Shan, it also aligns itself with rationality and humanism, which is evidenced in its philosophy of development, its system of temple management, its concept of social service, its awareness of a community of shared fate, and its attitude of equality and tolerance, and also in the practices of the Three Acts of Goodness and Four Givings which are promoted as methods of daily practice.<sup>26</sup> I am thus of the opinion that Humanistic Buddhism should boldly and confidently persevere in its alignment with rationality, humanism, and science. There really is no need to avoid the topic. Its alignment with such values does not imply that Humanistic Buddhism is deviating from Buddhism’s traditional spirit—the original intents of the Buddha—instead, Humanistic Buddhism’s attitude of aligning itself to rationality is precisely motivated by the original intents. Such an alignment is based on the convergence between Buddhism’s tradition of rationality and modern rationality. This is encapsulated in Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s classic interpretation of Humanistic Buddhism:

Humanistic Buddhism is that which was taught by the Buddha himself, that which is needed by human beings, that which is pure, and that which is virtuous and beautiful. All teaching that promotes the happiness of humanity represents the essence of Humanistic Buddhism.<sup>27</sup>

In this explanation, “that which was taught by the Buddha himself” is in accordance with the original intents of the Buddha, “that which is needed by human beings” is in accordance with humanism, while “that which is pure, and that which is virtuous and beautiful...that promotes the happiness of humanity” corresponds to the core values of modern society. As a matter of fact, rationality is the basis of modern human civilization, denying or disregarding it will deny people entry into the public sphere and hamper effective communication, without which we will be led down the old path of superstition. Certainly, modern rationality is not the universal solution to everything, especially with its tendency towards instrumental rationality, which to some extent negatively influences people’s psychology, values, aesthetic appreciation, and even ethics. However, we should not take criticism of instrumental rationality as a wholesale rejection of rationality. Therefore, using this line of argument as an excuse to criticize and attack Humanistic Buddhism is wholly unjustified.

Besides, rationality and sensibility are inseparable in a philosophic sense; neither exists entirely devoid of the other. The benefit of rationality is in its capability to question and doubt, so that one may enter the door of faith through understanding, which is consistent with the Dharma practice of “faith, understanding, practice, and attainment.”

In personal religious faith, mystical experiences are normal and undeniable. However, when it comes to the propagation of Buddhism in the public sphere, it is necessary to stick to a position of rationality. Otherwise, what can we claim to be “rational”? This itself is also a very complicated question, as each culture has its own tradition of rationality, so criticizing Humanistic Buddhism from an anti-rational position is superficial. As a matter of fact, we have seen the other face of Humanistic Buddhism, where it exerts itself in a bid to remedy the conundrums brought by modern rationality through the Buddha’s original intents and its own rationality. Taixu once said: “The uniqueness of Chinese Buddhism lies in the Chan School.” Humanistic Buddhism has inherited Chan’s spirit and style. The transcendent nature of Chan Buddhism is reflected throughout our daily life, in the realization of our minds, in our many daily activities, and in every moment. As Venerable Master Hsing Yun wrote:

Is not your reliance on Buddha's teaching on the Three Dharma Seals, Four Noble Truths, Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, Six Paramitas, the Bodhi Mind, and the Bodhisattva path also sacred?

When each of us keeps faith that Humanistic Buddhism will bring harmony, family happiness, a positive mind, and liberation, is this also not sacred?

Since Humanistic Buddhism is centered on human beings, the true Buddhist teachings shall carry the aim of finding ultimate happiness by relying on oneself, and the Dharma. Is this not sacred?

By reaching out to society and serving the people, are not the great ideals and aspirations of 'propagating the Dharma to benefit living beings' and 'to reach for Buddhahood and at the same deliver living beings' sacred?"<sup>28,29</sup>

Consequently, when faced with the criticism that Humanistic Buddhism lacks sacrality and transcendence, we should turn the tables to examine the questioner's understanding of the Buddha and Buddhism. The Buddha was a fully awakened "human," he was not a god, nor is Buddhism theistic. Therefore, Buddhism's sacrality and transcendence are expressed in the process that transforms humans into buddhas. Buddhism believes that all living beings possess Buddha-nature and (theoretically) all can become buddhas—the relationship between humans and Buddha is thus distinct from the Christian one between humans and God.

## **5. Conclusion**

Taixu's advocacy of Humanistic Buddhism in the early modern era was the result of a combination of historical and temporal factors, and the choice to continue its promotion was made through the collective wisdom of contemporary Buddhist masters. From the perspective of Buddhism's "accordance with truth," Humanistic Buddhism is doctrinally a direct inheritance of the Buddha's original intent. An orientation toward humanism and realism has long been expressed

in Mahāyāna Buddhism. These characteristics also existed at the time of the Buddha’s teaching—they are truly the original intents of the Buddha.

From the perspective of Buddhism’s “accordance with capabilities,” Humanistic Buddhism adapted to the changes of modernity in contemporary society. It found a way to align itself to the values of modern society, and modern human’s need for, understanding of, and practice of Buddhism. At the same time, it found the potential for Buddhism’s survival and continued development. From the perspective of successful application, Humanistic Buddhism in the Chinese mainland and Taiwan has had strong growth. In particular, Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s Fo Guang Shan Order has gained much traction globally and bolstered the spiritual confidence of contemporary Buddhism. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that Humanistic Buddhism, which is in accordance with truth and capabilities, has become mainstream, instead, it is a result of “the causes and conditions of a great event.”

In Buddhism there is a strong emphasis on “teaching in conformity with the mental capacity of listeners,” and so teachings should correspond to the capabilities and characteristics of sentient beings in their own particular time and societal setting. Venerable Master Hsing Yun is an eminent monk who truly understands how to adjust his methods according to the needs of the times, and he propagates Humanistic Buddhism in accordance with the truth and the capabilities of devotees. He has inherited Buddhist traditions and continues to develop them, but he has never conservatively stuck to them. Instead he is adept at innovating in response to changing circumstances.

While we observe that Venerable Master Hsing Yun promotes Humanistic Buddhism as pioneered by Taixu, he continuously adapts to modern needs by proposing novel approaches and exploring new ways of teaching. In the process of establishing himself in Yilan, to building up the Fo Guang Shan Order, and then going on to internationalize the organization, Venerable Master Hsing Yun has always been flexible. By merging *prajñā* wisdom and expedient means, he successfully built the theoretical foundations and the model for the practical application of Humanistic Buddhism, pointing a clear path toward a way forward for its sustained development.

## Notes

- 1 “Humanistic Buddhism is to clarify that Buddhism neither teaches people to abandon humankind to become gods or ghosts, nor [does it ask] all to renounce as monks to live in the monastery in the wilderness. It is to use Buddhist principles to reform society, to create progress for the people and to improve the world. It is going to lead humankind to progress.” Taixu, “How to Establish Humanistic Buddhism,” in *The Complete Work of Taixu*, vol. 14, 431. Translation of Gina Yang, in “Buddha of the Human World: The Hermeneutic of the Buddha in Humanistic Buddhism in the case of The Biography of Śākya-muni Buddha and the Buddha Memorial Centre,” [https://www.academia.edu/32613851/The\\_Hermeneutic\\_of\\_the\\_Buddha\\_in\\_Humanistic\\_Buddhism\\_in\\_the\\_case\\_of\\_The\\_Biography\\_of\\_%C5%9A%C4%81kyamuni\\_Buddha\\_and\\_the\\_Buddha\\_Memorial\\_Centre\\_%E4%BA%BA%E9%96%93%E4%BD%9B%E6%95%99%E4%B9%8B%E4%BD%9B%E9%99%80%E7%9A%84%E8%A9%AE%E9%87%8B%E7%A0%94%E7%A9%B6\\_%E4%BB%A5%E4%BD%9B%E9%99%80%E7%B4%80%E5%BF%B5%E9%A4%A8%E7%82%BA%E4%B8%AD%E5%BF%83](https://www.academia.edu/32613851/The_Hermeneutic_of_the_Buddha_in_Humanistic_Buddhism_in_the_case_of_The_Biography_of_%C5%9A%C4%81kyamuni_Buddha_and_the_Buddha_Memorial_Centre_%E4%BA%BA%E9%96%93%E4%BD%9B%E6%95%99%E4%B9%8B%E4%BD%9B%E9%99%80%E7%9A%84%E8%A9%AE%E9%87%8B%E7%A0%94%E7%A9%B6_%E4%BB%A5%E4%BD%9B%E9%99%80%E7%B4%80%E5%BF%B5%E9%A4%A8%E7%82%BA%E4%B8%AD%E5%BF%83).
- 2 Translation of Daoru Wei, “Buddhism in China and Modern Society: An Introduction Centering Around the Teachings of Taixu and Yinshun,” *Journal of Oriental Studies* 20 (2010): 171-82.
- 3 《僧伽制度論》、《僧制今論》、《建僧大綱》-Ed.
- 4 信解行證 (faith, understanding, practice, realization) -Ed.
- 5 「我以為在我們信奉的教義中應提倡人間佛教思想。它的基本內容包括五戒、十善、四攝、六度等自利利他的廣大行願。」-Ed.
- 6 「愛護你的色身，它不僅是你的，更是你的家人親人的、他人的，一個健康的身體是修道覺悟的根基……」-Ed.
- 7 「人生苦短，早往生早解脫」-Ed.
- 8 「人生改善、後世增勝、生死解脫、法界圓明」-Ed.
- 9 我倡導「平等」，深信男女、貧富等在平等之中，不可以有所歧視。眾生皆有佛性，情與無情，都能同圓種智，所以我從「人權的平等」到「生權的提倡」，希望徹底落實「眾生平等」的精神。大家對山上的老樹、小花，要多多愛護，山下的村民、百姓，應該給予關懷；育幼院的兒童要多多鼓勵，精舍安養的老人要時常慰問，對開山的諸長老要給予尊重。-Ed.
- 10 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Hear Me Out, Messages from a Humble Monk* (Taipei: Buddha’s Light Missionary Association, Chunghua and Fubao Wenhua [福報文化], 2015), 582.
- 11 人間佛教本源於佛陀，現在已經成為普遍的氣候；所以佛光山、佛光會的發展，必定會成為佛教界一個正派的團體。但世間的人事各有所執，自古以來，在印度就有上座部、大眾部，傳到中國有八大宗派，在教義上實踐理念上各有不同，無可厚非，但如果在人我是非上較量，那完全不能契合佛心。-Ed.
- 12 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Hear Me Out, Messages from a Humble Monk* (Taipei: Buddha’s Light Missionary Association, Chunghua and Fubao Wenhua [福報文化], 2015), 581.
- 13 「另立門戶，我們也要有雅量接受佛光的分燈法脈。只要對宗門沒有傷害，不要給予排擠，還要給予包容。」-Ed.
- 14 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Hear Me Out, Messages from a Humble Monk* (Taipei: Buddha’s Light Missionary Association, Chunghua and Fubao Wenhua [福報文化], 2015), 581-82.

- 15 Taixu, "Buddhism's Perspective on Life (佛教的人生觀)," in *The Complete Works of Venerable Taixu*, vol. 43, 924-25.
- 16 「圓覺之乘，不外大智慧、大慈悲之兩法，而唯人具茲本能…… 唯此仁智慧是圓覺因，即大乘之習所成種姓，亦即人道之乘也。換言之，人道之正乘，即大乘之始階也。」-Ed.
- 17 Taixu, "On Liang Shuming's 'Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies,'" in *The Complete Works of Venerable Taixu*, vol. 50, 305.
- 18 「(人間佛教)下者可漸之以五乘的佛法，除惡行善，以增進人世的福樂。中者可漸之以三乘共佛法，斷妄證真，以解脫人生的苦惱。上者可頓之以大乘的不共法，即人而佛，以圓滿人性之妙覺。」-Ed.
- 19 「佛陀出生在人間，修行在人間，成道在人間，說法在人間，他的一生正是人間佛教性格的體現；佛陀說法49年，講經300餘回，不是對神仙、鬼怪說的，也不是地獄、傍生說的，佛法主要還是以『人』為對象，所以它的本身就具備了人間佛教的性格。」-Ed.
- 20 See *Fafang Wenji*, vol. 4, ed. Liang Jianlou (Beijing: Gold Wall Press, 2011), 79.
- 21 「釋尊時代與小乘時代之人間佛教，可曰古代之人間佛教。自馬鳴至中國隋唐之大乘佛教時期之人間佛教，可曰中古時代之人間佛教。自佛教入西藏而遍於亞洲，可曰近世之人間佛教。現在二十世紀之世界佛教運動，可曰現在之人間佛教。」-Ed.
- 22 See *Fafang Wenji*, vol. 4, ed. Jianlou Liang (Beijing: Gold Wall Press, 2011), 79.
- 23 「說好話是真，做好事是善，存好心是美，讓三好運動的真善美要在社會裡生根。智就是般若，仁就是慈悲，勇就是菩提，要努力做到，讓戒定慧在我們的心裡成長，以實踐菩薩道作為我們人間的修行。」-Ed.
- 24 Liu Xiaofeng, *Introduction to Modern Social Theories* (Shanghai: Joint Publishing, 1998), 3.
- 25 「現代性是關於個體—群體心性結構及文化制度之質態和形態的變化。」-Ed.
- 26 For detailed information on Fo Guang Shan's ideals and approaches, please see publications such as *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intents of Buddha* and *Hear Me Out: Messages from a Humble Monk*.
- 27 「佛說的、人要的、淨化的、善美的，凡有助於增進幸福人生的教法，都是人間佛教」-Ed.
- 28 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intents of Buddha*, trans. Miao Guang (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2016), 4.
- 29 你依止佛陀三法印、四聖諦、十二因緣、六度萬行等修行，發菩提心，行菩提道，這不是神聖性嗎？每一個人都能信仰人間佛教，都能人我和諧、家庭幸福、積極增上、解脫自在，这不都是神聖性嗎？人間佛教是以人為本，不假神權，真正的佛法是創造人生究竟的幸福，「自依止，法依止」，這不是神聖性嗎？人間佛教走入社會、服務社會大眾，所謂弘法利生，上求佛道，下化眾生，這樣的胸懷和理想，不都是神聖性嗎？-Ed.