

**STUDIES ON  
HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM VI**

**HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM:  
WISDOM AND COMPASSION IN ACTION  
般若智慧與善巧方便的人間佛教**

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

# **BEYOND THE STROKE: THE DHARMA OF ONE-STROKE CALLIGRAPHY**

**Julius Hofer**

*M.A. Student, Nan Tien Institute*

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In his book, *Travel Like the Clouds and Water*<sup>1</sup>, Venerable Master Hsing Yun, who is one of the main proponents of Humanistic Buddhism,<sup>2</sup> instructs the viewers of his one-stroke calligraphy to look inside his heart and not just at the characters he uses in calligraphic writing. Considering that calligraphy is the highest form of East Asian art,<sup>3</sup> anyone who is not familiar with its immense and complex body of theory and principles could find this simplistic instruction intimidating. How does one look beyond the cursive black lines and forms of an ink artwork that appears to be unskillfully brushed on white paper? Can the core concepts and guiding principles of Humanistic Buddhism help one realize the altruistic meaning of a monk's contemporary calligraphy? More importantly, can Humanistic Buddhist art inspire the awakening of *bodhi* in the viewer?

The purpose of Buddhism is to inspire faith and enlightenment. Humanistic Buddhism is mainstream Buddhism taught by the Buddha so as to illuminate humankind in this human world. Its essence is to awaken wisdom, clarity, and rationality through the repudiation of mysticism, superstitious beliefs, and blind faith. It emphasizes “self-awareness, self-enlightenment, and self-improvement” through its core teachings and the application of these teachings in day-to-day practice.<sup>4</sup> The core concepts of Buddhism are comprised of: the Five Precepts; the Ten Good Virtues; the Four Immeasurable States of Mind; the Four Means of Embracing; the Middle Path; and the Six *Pāramitās*. Humanistic Buddhists not only study and learn these principles, but most importantly, they practice them in everyday life.<sup>5</sup>

These Humanistic Buddhist cultural paradigms can be applied in contemporary art, particularly, East Asian calligraphy. The ninety-seven-year-old Venerable Master Hsing Yun, founder of the Fo Guang Shan religious order, established four objectives for the development of Humanistic Buddhism. These objectives are: (1) to propagate Dharma through culture, (2) to foster talents through education, (3) to benefit society through charity, and (4) to purify human minds through spiritual cultivation.<sup>6</sup> Thus, this essay's objective is to show how Humanistic Buddhist principles can be applied in art. It discusses how this eminent monk exemplifies Humanistic Buddhism

through his successful personal artistic endeavor.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun, considered one of the most prominent Buddhist monks in Taiwan and throughout the world, cites lack of confidence in his own calligraphic writing skill as the third shortcoming in his monastic life.<sup>7</sup> This intimate first-person pronouncement humanizes the great Chan master, thus living up to the principles of Humanistic Buddhism. Unlike hagiographies of the past where eminent monks are portrayed as transcendental beings who possess superpowers and unattainable spiritual depths,<sup>8</sup> Venerable Master Hsing Yun is quoted as sincerely declaring his own humanity. In so doing, he is conforming to the humanistic view that he is a mortal monk with bodhisattva qualities of immeasurable compassion and *prajñā* wisdom, one who is building a Pure Land in this worldly realm.

In his teaching work, spanning almost three quarters of a century, the eminent monk utilizes different cultural and artistic approaches to provide inspiration. The elaboration of his one-stroke calligraphy, which grew out of adversity, is an example of one of his most prolific and skillful means of practicing generosity, the first of the six *pāramitās*.<sup>9</sup>

Venerable Master Hsing Yun recounts that almost seventy years ago he first picked up the brush to write a few characters on the cheapest poster paper and pasted them on the wall during the seven-day Amitabha chanting retreat. The altruistic intention behind his earliest writings was evident. He wanted to help enlighten the devotees by encouraging them to chant the Buddha's name. This selfless intent is rooted in his practice of giving fearlessness and giving of the Dharma.

While doing so however, he confides that he had feelings of inadequacy and shame over his initial brushwork. Such that he could barely look at the characters. Despite that misgiving, however, he continued to motivate the advancement of the devotees' cultivation by writing hundreds of Dharma phrases of encouragement every year during this recurring Pure Land occasion.<sup>10</sup> Thus, persistently, for twenty-six years in Yilan, he sustained the

giving of fearlessness and of the Dharma through writing characters.

It all has relevant connections to Humanistic Buddhism and the three aspects in the practice of generosity. These are: (1) giving of wealth or material objects, (2) giving the Dharma, and (3) the giving of fearlessness.<sup>11</sup> The second and third aspects make for excellent forms of generosity because, not only do they allow one to improve good virtues, but they also grant one the aspiration to seek mental and spiritual transcendence. To quote Venerable Master Hsing Yun, “The greatest giving is when a word or a sentence of Dharma inspires faith in others.”<sup>12</sup>

Such faith engendered more followers at the Pu Men Temple in Taipei in the 1980s; Venerable Master Hsing Yun had just written the characters “faith, understanding, practice and realization” right after the Emperor Liang Repentance Service. A participant approached Venerable Master Hsing Yun and discreetly offered a hundred thousand Taiwanese dollars concealed within a red packet.<sup>13</sup> The monk tried to return the money but the supporter refused to take it back. In reciprocation, the Venerable gave the participant the calligraphic work. Overjoyed, the devotee showed the four characters to the four hundred participants at the main shrine. The other devotees who regularly attended the Dharma talks consequently jumped at this opportunity to request the monk for his written Dharma words. He did not decline, he gratefully took this chance to develop closer affinities with them, working tirelessly for two days on the calligraphy requests.

Several million Taiwanese dollars were raised from this event, with Venerable Master Hsing Yun gifting his calligraphy to the devotees and using the proceeds to start the establishment of the University of the West. The positive response to the silent Dharma of his brush and ink boosted the Venerable Master’s confidence. From then on, he would write annual scrolls with inspiring words for each new year.<sup>14</sup>

Soon after, there were more requests for his artistic work which were then used in charity sales and fundraising events by members of the Buddha’s Light

International Association, a non-profit lay organization that he co-founded in 1991. Venerable Master Hsing Yun's gifts of calligraphy enabled him to build good relationships that were instrumental to his establishing more than four hundred temples and five universities all over the world. Donations made for his calligraphic work went to the Hsing Yun Public Educational Trust Fund.<sup>15</sup>

In 2005, Venerable Master Hsing Yun's works were exhibited at the National Art Gallery of Malaysia. Subsequently, the "To Enlighten Sentient Beings" calligraphy exhibit travelled to the United States, China, Australia, and New Zealand. There were many more exhibits that followed.<sup>16</sup> However, in the mid-to-late 1990s health issues almost prevented him from producing more of his Dharma art.

At the age of 70, Venerable Master Hsing Yun's vision progressively weakened and his hands trembled due to complications from diabetes. Instead of abandoning his art, he thought compassionately of his disciples, devotees, and non-Buddhist audience. He unflinchingly picked up his brush. With unsteady, shaking hands, he persistently wrote Dharma words and phrases.

Once he dipped his brush in ink, the determined monk had to complete a phrase in a single stroke, otherwise he wouldn't know where he exited the last stroke and where the succeeding characters started. Thus, relying on intuition, he had to finish the entire piece in one continuous, interconnected stroke.<sup>17</sup> This unique style became known as one-stroke calligraphy.

Transcending corporal difficulties, the accomplished artist used the wondrousness of *bodhi* and absolute emptiness of his Chan mind to continue giving joy, hope, and faith. Coursing aspirations from mind to ink and paper, Venerable Master Hsing Yun, the worldly bodhisattva, endured in his quest to deliver sentient beings from suffering despite his own suffering.

Generosity is the best way to establish good affinities as well as the most skillful means to inspire others to learn Buddhism. In Humanistic Buddhism, there is equality in giving and receiving.<sup>18</sup> For one to give, there has to be a

receiver; for one to receive, there has to be a giver. The prevailing cultural paradigm however supposes that the role of the giver is a superior position compared to that of the receiver. This consumerist program of truth arises from personal bias; individuals choose what they believe will offer them the most desirable result in terms of role playing.<sup>19</sup>

In the Buddhist view however, both acts of giving and receiving are equally meritorious. In order for the giver to practice generosity there has to be a receiver who can practice gratitude. For a receiver to cultivate gratitude there has to be an altruistic giver.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun is the giver of the Dharma, however, one cannot appreciate his gift based on the regular conventions of calligraphic theories and techniques. One-stroke calligraphy, with its characteristic uninterrupted flow of semi-cursive and cursive strokes, is an experience of Chan for both the artist and the audience. Chan, according to Bodhidharma, the first patriarch of the lineage, is a special transmission outside the scriptures. It is a direct pointing to the human mind and the realization of enlightenment.<sup>20</sup> In other words, Chan is awakening through mundane, daily life activities and not through devotion alone. Thus, whether one is a devotee or not, one can experience the gift of awakening through the accomplished monastic's brushwork.

One might argue that receiving the Dharma effectively is not possible when the receiver does not understand the meaning of the characters. However, contemporary calligraphy is not that complicated. While style and tradition are important, the combination of a contextual and purely graphical approach is more useful in this artform. Contemporary East Asian calligraphy is past the point where the viewer needs to read and understand the script in order to enjoy or learn from it.<sup>21</sup> By avoiding the stress of deciphering the meaning of the characters, the general audience may be able to experience the purely creative values of contemporary calligraphy. Exposure to the dance composition of line and form in space choreographed by Venerable Master Hsing Yun's brush can then be immediately appreciated and assimilated by a

viewer who is not Buddhist or who cannot read East Asian script. This direct appreciation of art with no notions of meaning is in itself a practical teaching and the actual experience of Chan. Viewing one-stroke calligraphy can bring a moment of calm, query, or clarity, and that is enough. That moment of calm plants the seed of awakening. Once planted in the viewer's mind, questions can arise and with questions comes realizations and, invariably, the lucidity of awakening.

It is important to bear in mind that unlike normal calligraphy, Venerable Master Hsing Yun's characters embody his teachings spiritually and artistically. This is where his artwork differs dramatically from regular calligraphy where the focus is on the elements of balance, form, and meaning. Venerable Master Hsing Yun's calligraphy does not aspire for perfection, grace, or holiness. His cursive characters are spontaneously imperfect, worldly, and through their ordinariness, they go beyond perfection and holiness. His inkwork can thus be experienced as abstractions that express the inexpressible teachings of Chan. It is a successful means of Dharma propagation, a contemporary Humanistic Buddhist artform that can rouse the awakening of the *bodhi* mind and establish the interconnectedness of humanity. In the hands of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, calligraphy has been transformed into Dharma art that, even when stripped of its literal meaning or symbolism, inspires enlightenment. One-stroke calligraphy is Dharma transmission beyond the stroke.

## Notes

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- 3 Stephen Little, "Chinese Calligraphy," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 74. no. 9 (2987): 372-403. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25160005>
- 4 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intent of the Buddha* (Taiwan: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise), 2.
- 5 Darui Long, "Humanistic Buddhism from Venerable Tai Xu to Grand Master Hsing Yun," *Hsi Lai Journal of Humanistic Buddhism* 1 (2000): 69. <http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-JHB/jhb94215.htm>

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- 6 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intents of the Buddha* (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2016), 30.
- 7 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Travel Like the Clouds and Water: Venerable Master Hsing Yun's One-Stroke Calligraphy* (Taipei: National Museum of History, 2019).
- 8 Jack Meng-Tat Chia, "Toward a Modern Buddhist Hagiography: Telling the Life of Hsing Yun in Popular Media," *Asian Ethnology* 74, no. 1 (2015): 141-165. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43610655>
- 9 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Buddha-Dharma Pure and Simple 2* (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2022), 105.
- 10 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Travel Like the Clouds and Water: Venerable Master Hsing Yun's One-Stroke Calligraphy* (Taipei: National Museum of History, 2019), 7.
- 11 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Buddha-Dharma Pure and Simple 2* (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2022), 45.
- 12 Ibid., 51.
- 13 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Travel Like the Clouds and Water: Venerable Master Hsing Yun's One-Stroke Calligraphy* (Taipei: National Museum of History, 2019), 6.
- 14 Anglo Asiatic Arts and Heritage Alliance, "One-Stroke Calligraphy Exhibition," AAAHA (2016), accessed 11 November 2022, <https://aaaha.co.uk/current-projects/x-drifts-festival-2016/one-stroke-calligraphy/>
- 15 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, "One Stroke Calligraphy by Hsing Yun," London Fo Guang Shan, June 26, 2016, YouTube video, 16:08, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FltgRzg-CM4&ab\\_channel=LondonFoGuangShan](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FltgRzg-CM4&ab_channel=LondonFoGuangShan)
- 16 K. W. Mak, "Exhibition on Monk's Works," Buddhist Channel (2005), accessed 11 November 2022, <https://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=5,1006,0,0,1,0>
- 17 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, "One Stroke Calligraphy by Hsing Yun," London Fo Guang Shan, June 26, 2016, YouTube video, 16:08, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FltgRzg-CM4&ab\\_channel=LondonFoGuangShan](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FltgRzg-CM4&ab_channel=LondonFoGuangShan)
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