

**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**

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and  
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**VENERABLE MASTER HSING YUN  
AND THE REINTERPRETATION  
OF THE “PURE LAND” WITHIN  
HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM**

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Lih Jing Ting, “Venerable Master Hsing Yun and the Reinterpretation of the ‘Pure Land’ within Humanistic Buddhism,” *Studies on Humanistic Buddhism*, no. 6 (October 2024): 251-258, <https://journal.nantien.edu.au>.

This essay examines the teaching of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, one of the leading active proponents of Humanistic Buddhism. It begins by discussing the historical and contemporary status of Humanistic Buddhism, contextualizing it as a movement borne out of modernist influences and demands placed upon Buddhism to adapt and reform according to an ever-changing social world. Venerable Master Hsing Yun's notion of "the Pure Land," a Buddhist concept he reinterprets as demanding the creation of an "earthly" Pure Land is examined. This interpretation, it is argued, is tied to pragmatic concerns regarding the necessity to reform Buddhist practices in order to successfully spread Buddhist teachings in the modern world. The essay draws parallels between the example of socially engaged practices of Christian missions at the turn of the century in China and the rationale underlying the drive to reform among nascent Humanistic Buddhists, such as in the teaching of Master TaiSxu. The example of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's advocacy for creating an "earthly" Pure Land demonstrates how contemporary Humanistic Buddhist theory follows this logic and interprets traditional Buddhist teachings as advocating for socially engaged practices among both monastics and laypeople. To this end, Venerable Master Hsing Yun's teaching regarding "life education" reinterprets spiritual development as practices designed to improve the external world rather than solely the individual's internal world. This is demonstrated in Fo Guang Shan's strategy of spreading Buddhism in mainland China through cultural education and activities rather than proselytization.

One of the central problems that Humanistic Buddhism has attempted to address is the challenge posed by modernism to Buddhism in China, prompting its proponents to advocate for the "reform" of Buddhist practices in many cases. This essay seeks to answer how does Humanistic Buddhism responds to the pressures placed upon it by modernism while remaining faithful to the core of Buddhist teachings.

In order to limit the scope this research somewhat, the study focuses on the work of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, an active proponent of Humanistic Buddhism. Specifically, it examines his interpretation of the concept of the

“Pure Land” and his application of it in advocacy for a socially engaged form of contemporary Buddhist practice.

Humanistic Buddhism refers to modern philosophical practices originating in Chinese Buddhist thought across the early twentieth century and continuing in their development up unto the present day. Humanistic Buddhism has its origins in the attempts of various Buddhist scholars to reform the religion along modernist lines, particularly with regard to emphasizing Buddhism as a philosophy and set of practices serving primarily the human world rather than focusing on the dead.<sup>1</sup> As such, it interprets traditional Buddhist rituals as aimed ultimately at serving humanity.

This has necessitated a reorientation of the Buddhist worldview and the paradigm within which its traditional rituals take place. Critical to reforming this worldview have been numerous scholars acting as proponents of a Humanistic Buddhism, one of whom is Venerable Master Hsing Yun. He is considered one of the four leading masters of Taiwanese Buddhism and has been incredibly influential upon Humanistic Buddhism as a whole, both through his Buddhist order Fo Guang Shan and in his scholarly work.<sup>2</sup>

As with many Humanistic Buddhists, Venerable Master Hsing Yun has sought to reinterpret traditional rituals within a humanistic worldview, explaining that this reinterpretation allows such rituals to serve the living rather than the dead. One of the primary ways in which Venerable Master Hsing Yun has brought this about is through emphasizing the Dharma elements of rituals, both in their original form and in reformed versions of these rituals.<sup>3</sup> A justification for this is that it has roots in Master Taixu’s interpretation of Buddhism, in which buddhahood can only be attained on the earthly realm rather than in any other realm, necessitating a focus on practices that benefit humans in the here and now.<sup>4</sup>

This emphasis on Dharma has also fed into reinterpretations of Buddhist practices that have cultural implications, such as a reinterpretation of the role of *Saṅgha* being ultimately directed at enhancing humanity in this life rather

than focusing on rituals for the dead. As the following section demonstrates, this has motivated proponents of Humanistic Buddhism such as Venerable Master Hsing Yun to advocate for Buddhist practices that benefit the wider public rather than focusing on ritual and orientated towards the dead.

As stated above, one of the core concepts of Humanistic Buddhism is that the practices of Buddhism must enhance life for the living in order to assist people to achieve buddhahood. The particular necessity of this is increased by the world entering a state of what Master Taixu referred to as a period of “degenerate Dharma,” or a time of spiritual diminishing.<sup>5</sup> This broadly justifies Buddhist monastic practices being redirected towards helping the living through various means, such as through charitable works.

According to Venerable Master Hsing Yun, Buddhists have a particular duty to assist in the “life education” of individuals. This does not necessarily refer to education in the sense of skills required to gain employment, but rather living in accordance with Buddhist teaching in a way that benefits the individual in their day-to-day life:

Each day’s worth of practice is each day’s worth of merit. Each day’s share of negligence is each day’s share of vanity. True practice is found in everyday life, because the Buddha is nowhere but life itself.<sup>6</sup>

At the core of this is the idea that realization of non-self should not necessitate an abnegation of one’s enjoyment of life, and that it certainly does not necessitate suffering.

Tan summarizes Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s position on the purposes of life education as follows:

Unlike some traditional Buddhist concepts, Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s understanding of life is infused with care for the present lifetime, adding joy and positivity. He has always wanted to change

the public impression that Buddhism is inherently associated with suffering; for example, that a lay person cannot happily enjoy a life of marriage and childbirth, that monastics must be vegetarian, that one must get up very early every morning to go to the temple to worship the Buddha...<sup>7</sup>

The reinterpretation of Buddhist teachings to emphasize the importance of achieving buddhahood through everyday practices that improve the world refers to the Buddhist concept of “the Pure Land.”<sup>8</sup> Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s concept of the Pure Land is different from the descriptions found in the *Amitābha Sūtra* and likewise the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. He interprets these sources as evidence for the existence of an “earthly” Pure Land, which he believes can be created through transforming the mental outlook of individuals:

Both heaven and hell are in one’s mind ... As we have not been reborn in the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss at this moment, the way that we can be close to Amitābha Buddha is to work together to transform the *sahā* world into a pure land on earth.<sup>9</sup>

However, Venerable Master Hsing Yun argues that achieving a Pure Land on earth—even internally—is aided by the creation of an external Pure Land. He advocates for the preservation of the environment; the relieving of hardships at odds with human existence, such as hunger and homelessness; the abolition of poverty and economic inequality; peaceful and harmonious coexistence between peoples; and relief from mental and physical illness.<sup>10</sup> This entails different responsibilities on different people—people can assist in creating a Pure Land through following Buddhist teaching, but purifying their internal world will ultimately result in practices that purify the external and vice versa. Through these means, Buddhist practices designed to achieve enlightenment become practices to interact with the world rather than recommending separation from it.

## Critical Analysis

Venerable Master Hsing Yun's interpretation of the Buddhist concept of the Pure Land and its application to the aims of life education demonstrates how Humanistic Buddhism advocates for reform in Buddhist practice on the basis of traditional Buddhist writings and concepts. The radical shift implied by this reform is a reorientation of the Buddhist worldview from the next life to the current one, and likewise the aims of self-knowledge and spiritual education from internal and personal improvement to that of bettering society.

It is worth noting that these reforms to the Buddhist worldview and its practices proposed by Venerable Master Hsing Yun have their roots in modernist influences that emerged around the turn of the twentieth century. As Kimball has observed, they reflect a modernizing influence inspired to no small extent by the encroachment of Christianity into China during this time, and the example of Christianity and its institutions as serving society through setting up schools and hospitals.<sup>11</sup> This is reflected in Master Taixu's comments regarding the reasons for Christianity's success in China, "The Christians devote themselves to social benefits. They propagate their teachings by practicing altruism. This is something of significance, and we may adopt it."<sup>12</sup>

The demand for Buddhist monastics to enter into the secular world and attempt to spread Buddhist beliefs by improving human lives is reflected both in Venerable Master Hsing Yun's teaching regarding establishing an earthly Pure Land as well as the practices of his order. The strategy of spreading Buddhism through secular activities is clearly present in Fo Guang Shan's activities, both in its establishment of an order for laity, as well as its recent entry into the Chinese mainland.<sup>13</sup> The tolerance of the organization's presence in mainland China is to some extent a result of its claims to advocate for 'cultural exchange' rather than proselytization.<sup>14</sup>

Through such means, the strategy of Fo Guang Shan mimics that of the Christian missionaries who attempted to spread Christianity in China through

setting up institutions designed to benefit its population's non-spiritual well-being.<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that while these missionaries were undoubtedly successful in some of their methods, the widespread social backlash against Christianity that precipitated the Boxer Rebellion serves as a cautionary tale for how perceptions of foreign religions as being overzealous can encourage resistance to their mission. Humanistic Buddhism's status as a primarily Taiwanese phenomenon potentially renders it an alien philosophy from the perspective of mainland Chinese Buddhist populations.

## Conclusion

As the above analysis argues, Venerable Master Hsing Yun's interpretation of the concept of a Pure Land serves the broader aims of Humanistic Buddhism in advocating for a more socially engaged practice of Buddhism, both on the part of monastics as well as laypeople. Although advocating for this socially engaged Buddhism with relation to traditional Buddhist texts, the interpretations and practices proposed by Venerable Master Hsing Yun in fact react to modern social trends and attempt to reform Buddhism in a way that encourages sufficient life education according to contemporary requirements. Clear parallels can be drawn from the lessons learned among early Humanistic Buddhist masters regarding the successful encroachments made by Christianity into Chinese culture and the recent strategy for socially engaged Buddhism adopted by Humanistic Buddhists such as Venerable Master Hsing Yun in entering mainland China.

## Notes

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- 2 R L Kimball, "Humanistic Buddhism as conceived and interpreted by Grand Master Hsing Yun of Fo Guang Shan," *Hsi Lai Journal of Humanistic Buddhism*, vol. 1 (2000): 1, viewed 8 November 2021, <http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-JHB/jhb94214.htm>.
- 3 X Yu, "Re-creation of rituals in Humanistic Buddhism: a case study of Fo Guang



- Shan,” *Asian Philosophy*, vol. 23, no. 4 (2013): 357, viewed 7 November 2021, DOI 10.1080/09552367.2013.831609.
- 4 C Jones, Taixu’s “On the Establishment of the Pure Land in the Human Realm” (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 5-9.
  - 5 R L Kimball, “Humanistic Buddhism as conceived and interpreted by Grand Master Hsing Yun of Fo Guang Shan,” *Hsi Lai Journal of Humanistic Buddhism*, vol. 1 (2000): 11, viewed 8 November 2021, <http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-JHB/jhb94214.htm>.
  - 6 Tan Jie, “Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s perspective on Humanistic Buddhism’s life education,” *Studies on Humanistic Buddhism*, vol. 4 (2021): 13, viewed 6 November 2021 [https://journal.nantien.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/02-Venerable-Master-Hsing-Yuns-Perspective-on-Humanistic-Buddhism\\_s-Life-Education.pdf](https://journal.nantien.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/02-Venerable-Master-Hsing-Yuns-Perspective-on-Humanistic-Buddhism_s-Life-Education.pdf)
  - 7 *Ibid.*, 14.
  - 8 Jonathan Mair, “Fo Guang Shan Buddhism and ethical conversations across borders: ‘sowing seeds of affinity’,” *COLLeGIUM: Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 15 (2014): 70, viewed 6 November 2021, [https://kar.kent.ac.uk/57898/1/04\\_MAIR\\_1305.pdf\\_sequence=1](https://kar.kent.ac.uk/57898/1/04_MAIR_1305.pdf_sequence=1).
  - 9 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Understanding Pure Land through the Amitabha Sutra*, trans. A Lam, (Kaohsiung: Foguang Cultural Enterprise Co., Ltd, Taiwan, 2018), 12.
  - 10 *Ibid.*, 13-14.
  - 11 R L Kimball, “Humanistic Buddhism as conceived and interpreted by Grand Master Hsing Yun of Fo Guang Shan,” *Hsi Lai Journal of Humanistic Buddhism*, vol. 1 (2000) 1-52, viewed 8 November 2021, <http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-JHB/jhb94214.htm>.
  - 12 Darui Long, “An interfaith dialogue between the Chinese Buddhist leader Taixu and Christians,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 20 (2000): 22.
  - 13 D Schak & H Hsiao, “Taiwan’s socially engaged Buddhist groups,” *China Perspectives*, vol. 59 (2005): 1-2, viewed 6 November 2021, DOI 10.4000/chinaperspectives.2803.
  - 14 I Johnson, “Is a Buddhist group changing China? or is China changing it?” *The New York Times*, 24 June, viewed 9 November 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/24/world/asia/china-buddhism-fo-guang-shan.html>.
  - 15 A Austin, *China’s Millions: the China Inland Mission and Late Qing Society, 1831-1905* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 92.