

**STUDIES ON
HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM VII**

**HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM:
BUDDHIST MANAGEMENT
人間佛教管理與應用**

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

SUNDAY CHECK-IN DIGITAL *SAṄGHA* OVERVIEW

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The Covid-19 pandemic led to significant changes in technological and social practices. Advances in online communication technology rapidly developed to accommodate what were hitherto face-to-face interactions. This assisted service points to continue operation and keep social networks and communities functioning. At the same time, new online communities emerged and continued as people began to recognize the communication benefits provided by digital communication technology. The function of these online communities, among many other things, is to assist in building a collective resilience to manoeuvre through what has now become an everyday experience of ambiguity and uncertainty. Buddhism has further adapted in response to modern society's social, political, and religious upheavals and crises. The Sunday Check-In program is a digital *Saṅgha*. The Sunday Check-In digital *Saṅgha* originally formed in 2020 as a safe place for people to take refuge and build supportive friendships during the Covid-19 pandemic. A volunteer initiative, the Sunday Check-In digital *Saṅgha* continues to thrive in increasingly divided and uncertain times due to the desire of the members to have a place of refuge shared with like-minded people.

The Sunday Check-In digital *Saṅgha* community began under the auspices of the Nan Tien Institute of Higher Education (NTI), established by the Fo Guang Shan monastic order. The Sunday Check-In project initially began prior to Covid-19, meeting as the Community of Practice on the grounds of the NTI¹. NTI is an Australian Government accredited higher education provider founded by Venerable Master Hsing Yun. NTI offers courses in the humanities and upholds the philosophy of Humanistic Buddhism.² As the Sunday Check-In uses principles of Humanistic Buddhism, this reflective essay will explore the historical contributions that have led to this new form of modern Buddhism. It will explore the developments in China and responses to modernism that carved a path for the development of Humanistic Buddhism and, importantly, how this new reformist Buddhism continues to survive and grow in a post-modern era. The longevity of the Sunday Check-In digital *Saṅgha* is an example of how Buddhist modernism adapts and responds to changing social and political environments. Furthermore, the Sunday Check-In digital *Saṅgha* is an example of the worldwide reach of

Buddhism. Individuals from all over the world can join each Sunday for thirty minutes. The Sunday Check-In digital *Saṅgha* is an example of how Buddhism continues to adapt to a postmodern world.

Analysis of the Sunday Check-In Digital *Saṅgha*

NTI is located in Wollongong, New South Wales Australia and is a part of the monastic order of Fo Guang Shan, with headquarters in Taiwan. One of the four goals of Fo Guang Shan is to propagate the Dharma through institutes of higher education.³ The Sunday Check-In digital *Saṅgha* exemplifies this goal, building community connections through the Dharma. *Saṅgha* is a term for a monastic order that practices a form of Buddhism.⁴ The first *Saṅgha* was a group of monks who were disciples of Siddhattha Gotama (the Buddha) during his life (~566–486 BCE). Buddhist monastic *Saṅgha*'s continue today in all forms and traditions of Buddhism and include lay devotees along with monks and nuns. To contextualize the development of the Sunday Check-In digital *Saṅgha*, it is necessary to understand the influences that allowed a new form of Buddhism to evolve and spread globally with both a physical and online presence.

A historical trajectory of Buddhism is an important factor for determining the origins of new forms and understandings. As noted by McMahan,⁵ a tradition brought into a new culture often reforms to harmonize with the host culture's norms and ideology. As the Sunday Check-In digital *Saṅgha* operates from an educational institution founded by Fo Guang Shan monastery, one should look at historical and cultural developments in Asia. According to Poceski,⁶ Buddhism entered China through traveling monks and merchants around the beginning of the Common Era. Even in its earliest forms, Buddhism had to evolve and adapt to be fully accepted in new locations.⁷ After the golden era of Buddhism during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), Buddhism as a philosophy and religion often struggled to survive in China.⁸ Competing with other religions and being oppressed by certain political inclinations led to an enervated state of Buddhism by the late nineteenth century.

Social and political turmoil and destabilization, however, can bring about renewal and reformation. The early twentieth century brought fresh hope of revival for Buddhism in China, mirroring the crisis of faith and legitimacy in the Western world. The end of the Qing dynasty (1911) signalled hope. However, China was left weakened and facing the challenge to meet modernity as defined on Western terms.⁹ McMahan notes that modernity in Western countries was characterized by a focus on scientific rationalism derived from the Enlightenment's claim that everything is explainable in scientific terms by reason and logic.¹⁰ Such thought impacted China, especially as the weakened Qing dynasty left room for a re-thinking of social and cultural practices. The reformation of Buddhist modernism in China developed in these circumstances, resulting in a new form of revitalized Buddhism for modern times. In any social upheaval, however, the challenge is often what elements of tradition should be retained and what should be reformed.

The reformed Buddhist modernism in the West emerged from a blend of influences, including Romanticism, Protestantism, and scientific rationalism, all of which were products of the Enlightenment period.¹¹ This modernized form of Buddhism was also shaped by resistance from Eastern figures like Anagarika Dharmapala, who opposed Christian missionary expansion and sought to reclaim Buddhism as a viable alternative. Similarly, in China, the development of modern Buddhism was influenced by a rejection of Western imperialism, a return to the foundational teachings of the Buddha, and an alignment with scientific rationalism.¹² These shared elements—scientific rationalism, anti-imperialism, and a focus on essential Buddhist principles—created a bridge between traditional Eastern practices and Western intellectual currents.

The intersection of traditional Buddhism in the East and the Western fascination with scientific rationalism gave rise to a global Buddhist modernism. Western converts like Paul Carus and Henry Steel Olcott played a significant role in this exchange by reintroducing scientific Buddhist modernism to Asian Buddhists. As a result, Buddhism in the West was reshaped by modernity's discourses, while Buddhism in the East experienced

a revitalization rooted in these same principles. This mutual exchange illustrates how Buddhism adapted to modern contexts on both sides of the globe.

Accordingly, a new form of Buddhism arose in China in the mid-twentieth century as both a response to the social, religious, and political crisis following the Qing dynasty and influences from discourses of modernity in the West. Master Taixu, a charismatic and widely read monk is credited by Poceski¹³ as driving the agenda to reform and modernize Buddhism through a reorganization of the monastic order, stripping the supernatural elements of prior traditions and claiming a return to the original teachings of the Buddha. Poceski claims in bringing Buddhism back to the mundane world, Taixu's Buddhism for Human Life is based on Western and secular models with Protestant influences. This is supported by Payne¹⁴ who suggests such claims of Buddhist authenticity represented the rise of secular Buddhism in the West. With Master Taixu's claims to bring Buddhism back to foundational teachings of the Buddha, it could be said Humanistic Buddhism developed much like the secular Buddhism influenced by Protestantism. This placed the reformation of Buddhist modernism in China parallel to the new Buddhism arising in the West.

As a result, Humanistic Buddhism became a strong foundation for Buddhist modernism, appealing to monastics looking to revitalize Buddhism in China. Highly influenced by Taixu, Venerable Master Hsing Yun sought to propagate this new reformist Buddhism. Raised in China, but fleeing communist rule to Taiwan after 1949, Venerable Master Hsing Yun vowed to put the focus back on the human component of Buddhism, discarding the supernatural and otherworldly elements.¹⁵ As such, there is notably a strong connection between Buddhist modernism and Buddhism's revival in Taiwan. Modern Buddhism in Taiwan has become a "vibrant religion [...] deeply relevant to life in the modern world."¹⁶ Based on the bodhisattva ideal of the Mahāyāna tradition of Buddhism, Venerable Master Hsing Yun established the Fo Guang Shan monastic order with global temples, universities, and educational facilities to spread the Dharma for the betterment of society.

Like Protestantism, by removing the intermediary to a higher power, the underpinning ideal of Humanistic Buddhism is that everybody has a “buddha-nature” which can be awakened to alleviate their own suffering.¹⁷ As noted by Li,¹⁸ this new form of Buddhism resonates with individuals looking to ease the suffering associated with modern challenges. The Sunday Check-In digital *Saṅgha* enables this resonance and the Dharma to reach a worldwide audience.

Personal Insights and Reflections

Studying Buddhism and Buddhist modernism during my time at NTI has significantly changed my perspective, revealing dimensions of Buddhist philosophy and history that I previously overlooked. Before this academic journey, my engagement with Buddhism was limited to its more ‘Buddhish’ commodified elements in popular culture, such as wellness programs. Writing about the Sunday Check-In digital *Saṅgha* marked the beginning of a deeper exploration of Buddhism. At a time when I was struggling with grief and existential questioning, this digital community became a refuge—a place where I felt emotionally safe, accepted, and supported. Through regular participation, I began to appreciate the significance of tacit social assumptions and daily practices, as emphasized by McMahan and Watson,^{19,20} and how these resonate with individuals on a profound level. This experience not only helped me heal, but also inspired me to embark on a postgraduate study of Humanistic Buddhism through NTI.

From my personal journey, I have come to see Buddhist modernism, and Buddhism as a whole, as deeply relevant to contemporary society. While some traditional Buddhist communities may find the global reach of modernized forms of Buddhism uncomfortable, I believe this evolution is crucial for its continued impact. For instance, Payne critiques Fo Guang Shan’s approach as merely describing the conditions and goals of human existence, but I argue that Buddhist modernism, including secularized forms of Buddhism, can profoundly transform individuals and, by extension, society.²¹ Lancaster offers compelling evidence of this, noting the physiological and psychological

benefits of Buddhist meditation practices among prison inmates.²² As Hawn (quoted in Lancaster²³) observes, Buddhist practices like meditation are grounded in proven science. Even when meditation is separated from its traditional Buddhist context and adapted to a secular, neoliberal framework, it can still foster compassion and loving-kindness, ultimately contributing to a better society.

However, this global adaptation of Buddhism is not without challenges. As Gleig and Artinger point out, Buddhism's integration into neoliberal ideology and the free-market economy creates opportunities for ambiguity, textual selectivity, and bias.²⁴ Similarly, Payne critiques secular Buddhism for stripping away key elements of the tradition, leaving it vulnerable to distortion.²⁵ These developments highlight the risk that any new form of Buddhism will inevitably be shaped by an ethnocentric lens. What I have learned from this is the importance of self-awareness—being mindful of the influences shaping one's perspective. For me, grounding myself in the interdependence of all living things and focusing on what resonates with Buddhist philosophy has been a way to maintain a clear vision of reality.

Ultimately, I find myself returning to the statement by Gleig and Artinger that “Buddhism is what Buddhists do.”²⁶ It is acts of compassion, kindness, mindfulness, and the desire to cultivate calmness and focus for the benefit of others that will have the most lasting impact. While moving away from tradition may be uncomfortable, it aligns with the broader Buddhist philosophy of accepting change and finding ways to work compassionately within new contexts. Personally, the Sunday Check-In digital *Saṅgha* has been a living example of Buddhist modernism in action. Its intellectual discussions, emotional safety, and non-judgmental environment have shown me how Buddhism can adapt to contemporary needs without losing its core values. This experience has reinforced my belief in the potential of Buddhism to inspire personal growth and contribute to a more compassionate world.

Notes

- 1 Nan Tien Institute, “Communities of Practice,” Nan Tien Institute of Higher Education, viewed 5 June 2024, Home—Communities of Practice, <https://thebbep.org>
- 2 Chen Bing, “Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s Humanistic Buddhism: New Dawn of True Dharma,” *Studies on Humanistic Buddhism: Foundational Thoughts*, no. 1 (September 2018): 83-151, <https://journal.nantien.edu.au>.
- 3 Nan Tien Institute, “About NTI—Nan Tien Institute—Postgraduate Education,” viewed 3 June 2024, <https://nantien.edu.au>.
- 4 Peter Harvey, “Introduction,” in Peter Harvey ed., *Buddhism*, (London & New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2001).
- 5 David McMahan, “Buddhism and the Discourses of Modernity,” *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: University Press, 2008).
- 6 Mario Poceski, “Contemporary Chinese Buddhist Traditions,” in Michael Jerryson ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 7 Maria Majorie Purino, “D.T. Suzuki’s Relevance to the Modernization of Buddhism,” *Studies on Humanistic Buddhism*, no. 5 (September 2023): 231-244, <https://journal.nantien.edu.au>.
- 8 Mario Poceski, “Contemporary Chinese Buddhist Traditions,” in Michael Jerryson ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 David McMahan, “Buddhism and the Discourses of Modernity,” *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: University Press, 2008).
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Mario Poceski, “Contemporary Chinese Buddhist Traditions,” in Michael Jerryson ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Richard Payne, “Conscious and Unconscious Dynamics in the Secularizing Discourse,” in Richard Payne ed., *Secularizing Buddhism: New Perspectives on a Dynamic Tradition* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2021).
- 15 Chen Bing, “Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s Humanistic Buddhism: New Dawn of True Dharma,” *Studies on Humanistic Buddhism: Foundational Thoughts*, no. 1 (September 2018): 83-151, <https://journal.nantien.edu.au>.
- 16 Mario Poceski, “Contemporary Chinese Buddhist Traditions,” in Michael Jerryson ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 17 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to Original Intents of the Buddha*, trans. Venerable Miao Guang (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2016).
- 18 Li Li’an, “The Harmonious Development between Humanistic and Traditional

- Buddhism and its Issues,” *Studies on Humanistic Buddhism: Foundational Thoughts*, no. 1 (September 2018): 67-75, <https://journal.nantien.edu.au>.
- 19 David McMahan, “Buddhism and the Discourses of Modernity,” *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: University Press, 2008).
- 20 Gary Watson, “Resonance of emptiness: Buddhism, Consciousness Studies and Psychotherapy,” *Contemporary Buddhism*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2008): 73-81, DOI 10.1080/14639940108573739.
- 21 Richard Payne, “Conscious and Unconscious Dynamics in the Secularizing Discourse,” in Richard Payne ed., *Secularizing Buddhism: New Perspectives on a Dynamic Tradition* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2021).
- 22 Lewis Lancaster, “Humanistic Buddhism: Responding to Contemporary Developments,” *Studies on Humanistic Buddhism 1: Foundational Thoughts*, no. 1 (September 2018): 294-299, <https://journal.nantien.edu.au>.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ann Gleig and Brenna Artinger, “The #BuddhistCultureWars: Buddha Bros, Alt-right Dharma, and Snowflake Saṅghas,” *Journal of Global Buddhism*, vol. 22, no. 4 (2021): 19-48, DOI: 105281/zenodo.4727561.
- 25 Richard Payne, “Conscious and Unconscious Dynamics in the Secularizing Discourse,” in Richard Payne ed., *Secularizing Buddhism: New Perspectives on a Dynamic Tradition* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2021).
- 26 Ann Gleig and Brenna Artinger, “The #BuddhistCultureWars: Buddha Bros, Alt-right Dharma, and Snowflake Saṅghas,” *Journal of Global Buddhism*, vol. 22, no. 4 (2021): 19-48, DOI: 105281/zenodo.4727561.