

**STUDIES ON
HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM**

**VENERABLE MASTER HSING YUN:
A LIFE REMEMBERED
緬懷星雲大師：人間佛教的思想與實踐**

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THE ROLE OF THE BUDDHA’S LIGHT INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION (BLIA) IN THE MODERN TRANSMISSION OF HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM

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Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed new movements within Buddhism. One response to modernization was the development of Humanistic Buddhism, an approach that integrates core Buddhist values into everyday life and civic society. At the forefront of this movement was Venerable Master Hsing Yun, founder of the Fo Guang Shan monastic order in Taiwan. Recognizing the rapid changes in global migration, technology, and education, he reimagined how Buddhism could remain relevant not only to monastics and scholars, but to ordinary laypeople. His establishment of the Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA) in 1992 marked a pivotal step in this vision, providing a structured platform for both monastics and laity to participate in the propagation of Humanistic Buddhism. Venerable Master Hsing Yun was so prolific in his writing and work that this article can only briefly discuss his contributions to BLIA and its transmission of Humanistic Buddhism.¹

Fo Guang Shan has grown since its founding in 1967 in Taiwan into what Reinke calls the leading contemporary Chinese Mahāyāna order.² Fo Guang Shan is an expansive worldwide network of temples and BLIA chapters which claim around two million registered members with more than two hundred temples in seventy countries and regions.³ BLIA is a nongovernmental association composed of an international network of lay practitioners and monastics of the Humanistic Buddhism of Fo Guang Shan. The integrated organizational structure created by the network of temples managed by monastics combined with over two hundred corresponding BLIA chapters mostly administered by lay practitioners has become transnational in nature.⁴

The inception of BLIA must be understood within the broader context of Chinese migration patterns in the latter half of the twentieth century. Waves of immigrants from Southeast Asia moved to the West—particularly to North America, Australia, United Kingdom and parts of Europe—often carrying with them cultural affiliations to Buddhism, even if they were not

active practitioners. Venerable Master Hsing Yun strategically responded to this phenomenon by establishing Fo Guang Shan temples and BLIA chapters in many of these destination countries. These temples did more than offer spiritual solace; they became community centers where migrants could gather, form support networks, and adapt to their new environments. In this sense, BLIA chapters and Fo Guang Shan temples functioned as both cultural sanctuaries and vehicles for religious continuity.

One could draw a comparison between the propagation and expansion of Humanistic Buddhism and the Catholic missionary movements as early as the sixteenth century.⁵ In particular, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Catholic and Protestant missionaries—often supported by colonial powers—capitalized on advances in maritime navigation, rail transport, and printing technologies to spread Christian doctrine throughout Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Missionaries such as the Jesuits in China, the Paris Foreign Missions Society in Vietnam, and Catholic educators in the Philippines sought not only to preach the gospel but also to reshape indigenous belief systems and social structures. Religious conversion was frequently tied to Westernization, with mission schools, hospitals, and churches serving both spiritual and civilizing agendas.

In contrast, the postwar spread of Humanistic Buddhism, particularly through the work of Venerable Master Hsing Yun and the establishment of Fo Guang Shan and BLIA, has pursued a fundamentally different trajectory. Enabled by modern air travel, telecommunications, and global migration, Humanistic Buddhism has grown into a transnational network of temples, cultural centers, and lay associations. However, unlike Christian missions which often aimed to replace local religions, Humanistic Buddhism emphasizes coexistence, moral development, and the integration of Buddhist values into daily life. Its focus is not on conversion but on cultivation—encouraging individuals of all backgrounds to adopt practices that lead to personal growth and social harmony.

A core component of this vision is BLIA, which serves as a dedicated

lay organization that allows individuals to learn about and engage with Buddhism without requiring monastic renunciation. It offers a structured, accessible platform for people from diverse walks of life to practice Buddhist values, volunteer for community service, and participate in Dharma propagation. For many, joining BLIA becomes a meaningful way to incorporate spiritual cultivation into ordinary life—balancing family, work, and social responsibilities while contributing to the wider Buddhist mission. In this respect, BLIA fulfills a role similar to that of Catholic lay orders or missionary auxiliaries. It provides a channel through which Buddhism can be practiced actively and collectively in a manner suited to modern pluralistic societies.

This model of expansion reflects the Humanistic Buddhist ethos that Buddhism must serve the human world as a source of ethical, emotional, and community enrichment. As Yu and Gombrich observed, Humanistic Buddhism somewhat followed the form and structure of Christianity rather than the content, and that Venerable Master Hsing Yun was particularly influenced by the Catholic Church.⁶ Unlike the Chinese Buddhist monasteries at the time, the Christians were involved in social welfare.⁷ The forms that influenced Humanistic Buddhism were Christian schools and hospitals. Social welfare became an important part of bringing Buddhism back into the lives of Chinese people.

Where Christian missionaries often saw religious dissemination as a zero-sum contest of belief systems,⁸ Humanistic Buddhism, as promoted by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, frames spiritual development as a cooperative and integrative process. He was particularly innovative in decoupling spiritual progress from monastic renunciation. BLIA provides an organizational structure where lay practitioners play an active role, working alongside monastics in leadership positions. He openly stated that becoming a monk or nun is not necessary to learn or practice Buddhism. Through BLIA, lay practitioners are encouraged to live ethically, serve society, and cultivate wisdom—without abandoning family responsibilities or career obligations. This inclusive model provides both the flexibility

and organizational structure necessary for Buddhism to flourish in modern pluralistic societies.

Nonetheless, the challenge of ensuring the continuity of these efforts is real. A significant concern lies in the generational transition within diasporic communities.⁹ First-generation migrants often retain fluency in the Chinese language and familiarity with traditional customs, while their children—born or raised in the West—are more likely to speak local languages such as English and adopt local cultural norms. As a result, younger generations may feel alienated from temple rituals conducted in unfamiliar languages and shaped by distant traditions. Additionally, they may not rely on temples as social hubs in the same way their parents did, having developed their own networks through schools, workplaces, and in more recent times, through digital platforms.

To address these challenges, BLIA must evolve by offering programs and services that align with the needs of contemporary society. Areas such as education, mental health, aged care, and social enterprise are fertile grounds where Buddhist principles can be applied meaningfully. These initiatives not only serve local communities but also create pathways for practicing and experiencing the Dharma in daily life. Importantly, these efforts must be pursued with the understanding that BLIA operates in a competitive ecosystem. Unlike purely religious offerings, social services often overlap with government programs and commercial enterprises. Maintaining a non-profit ethos while ensuring professional standards and sustainability remains an ongoing challenge.

In light of these considerations, the following will explore how BLIA, through its international chapters, has functioned as a dynamic force in the transmission of Humanistic Buddhism. It will also examine how the organization can adapt to changing demographic and cultural realities while remaining true to the founding vision of Venerable Master Hsing Yun. Ultimately, the ability of BLIA to serve as a bridge between tradition and modernity may well determine the future trajectory of Humanistic

Buddhism in the twenty-first century.

BLIA Organizational Structure

The Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA), founded by Venerable Master Hsing Yun in 1991 and formally inaugurated in Los Angeles in 1992, is a global lay Buddhist organization affiliated with the Fo Guang Shan monastic order. Anchored in the principles of Humanistic Buddhism, BLIA is a strategic and structural innovation that distinguishes itself from traditional Buddhist temples by formalizing volunteerism, providing organizational continuity, and extending the reach of Buddhist values in the modern world. BLIA is guided by four foundational objectives: to propagate the Dharma through cultural activities; to nurture talent through education; to benefit society through charity; and to purify human hearts and minds through spiritual cultivation.¹⁰ These objectives form the philosophical and practical basis for its wide range of activities and organizational focus.

Unlike many traditional Buddhist temples, which rely on informal networks of volunteers and spontaneous support during key festivals or events, BLIA institutionalizes the volunteer base into a formal and democratic structure. Each chapter operates with elected committee members, such as a president, secretary, and treasurer, as well as heads of various departments including culture, education, environmental care, and public communications. This design enables not only the smooth transmission of operational expertise from one term to another, but also ensures that knowledge and skills do not dissipate with changes in leadership. The structure promotes sustainability and adaptability, two qualities essential for the continued propagation of Buddhism in a rapidly changing global environment. Moreover, BLIA's transparent structure and governance allows for formal recognition of lay members.

By incorporating fixed terms and democratic elections for leadership positions, BLIA encourages the cultivation of new talent and fosters

diversity in governance. This is a novel feature in the context of traditional Buddhist institutions, which often lack such mechanisms for leadership renewal. In parallel, the monastics assigned to supervise Fo Guang Shan temples are also rotated every few years, a system that reflects the Buddhist principle of non-attachment and recalls the itinerant lifestyle of the early Buddhist *saṅgha*. This rotation not only prevents stagnation but also allows both monastics and lay members to develop a broader perspective on Dharma propagation.

The separation between BLIA chapters and their affiliated temples, while preserving close collaboration, is another hallmark of its innovation. Although BLIA is a distinct legal and organizational entity, it remains closely guided by the Fo Guang Shan monastics through the role of Guiding Reverends. These monastics ensure that all activities undertaken by BLIA are in alignment with Buddhist teachings, adhering to the maxim “Do nothing unless it was practiced by the Buddha” (非佛不做). This relationship allows for a dynamic yet grounded approach to organizational development, balancing lay initiative with monastic oversight.

As a lay organization, BLIA serves as a training ground for Buddhist practitioners who wish to deepen their practice without renouncing their household lives. Members are encouraged to engage actively in Dharma propagation, community service, and personal cultivation. The structure of BLIA enables laypeople to transform temple volunteering into a form of spiritual training, integrating Buddhist principles into everyday life. This hands-on, participatory approach significantly differs from the more passive roles lay devotees often occupy in traditional temples.

A key strength of BLIA is its ability to engage with external organizations. Because it operates independently of temple structures, it is well-positioned to collaborate with governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations, and interfaith groups. In Western countries especially, BLIA has played a prominent role in hosting interfaith dialogues, cultural exchanges, and environmental conservation initiatives,

thereby extending the influence and accessibility of Buddhism to broader audiences.¹¹ Its consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council since 2003 further underscores its global outreach and capacity to represent Buddhist values on international platforms.

Another unique feature of BLIA's governance is its democratic model. All leadership roles are elected, and terms are limited. This approach ensures that fresh perspectives are continuously brought into the organization and prevents stagnation. It also offers members the opportunity to take on leadership roles, fostering a sense of responsibility and shared ownership. The inclusion of time-bound leadership terms within the BLIA charter ensures not only democratic governance, but also the continuous evolution of the organization. This practice fosters a culture of inclusivity and renewal, ensuring that leadership does not become the domain of a select few but remains open to all capable members. The system also acts as a practical embodiment of Buddhist impermanence, reinforcing the idea that all roles are temporary and should be approached with humility and responsibility.

BLIA is not merely an administrative or service-based organization, it is also a platform for lay practitioners to deepen their understanding of the Dharma and take on the responsibility of becoming teachers in their own right. Venerable Master Hsing Yun strongly advocated for the “disciple-to-teacher” model, believing that spiritual growth stems from personal practice and experience. Rather than relying solely on ordained monastics for guidance, lay members are encouraged to study the teachings, cultivate their own wisdom, and actively propagate the Dharma.

To institutionalize this vision, BLIA established a formal structure that includes roles such as “Lay Dharma Teacher” (檀講師), providing a recognized pathway for lay practitioners to teach and lead.¹² These individuals are tasked not only with delivering lectures and facilitating Dharma discussions, but also with guiding others in applying Buddhist principles in everyday life. As a result, BLIA empowers members to take

ownership of their faith and to serve as spiritual mentors within their communities. This approach ensures that the transmission of Buddhism is not confined to the monastic order, but is a shared responsibility, creating a vibrant and inclusive movement capable of sustaining the Buddha's teachings into the future.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun's vision for BLIA ties traditional Buddhist principles with modern organizational practices. In *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intents of the Buddha*,¹³ he emphasized that Buddhism must adapt its forms while preserving its spirit. The creation and operation of BLIA are prime examples of this philosophy in action. Consequently, he has demonstrated that Buddhism is not only a spiritual or religious path, but also a model for ethical and effective organization. The way BLIA operates exemplifies this synthesis: a structured, volunteer-driven, ethically guided body that supports the propagation of the Dharma in modern society. It has become a living expression of Humanistic Buddhism, embodying compassion, wisdom, and community engagement. This innovative approach ensures that Buddhism remains relevant and impactful in the contemporary world, offering not just personal improvements but communal transformation.

Key Contributions and Areas of Work

The Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA) functions as more than a religious organization; it is a transformative platform where the practice of Buddhism merges with modern civic engagement and community service. At the heart of BLIA's operations is the belief that teamwork and service offer not only practical outcomes but are themselves forms of Dharma cultivation. According to Venerable Master Hsing Yun, the founder of BLIA, working together in harmony, performing altruistic acts in pursuit of common good allows members to apply the principles of Humanistic Buddhism in daily life.¹⁴ The cultural events, interfaith dialogues, and educational initiatives organized by BLIA are therefore not merely ends in themselves; they are a means for members to engage in

Buddhist practice through action.

The structure of BLIA allows for this engagement to be both meaningful and effective. As a lay organization operating adjacent to but separate from Fo Guang Shan monastic temples, BLIA enjoys a unique flexibility. This separation provides logistical and institutional latitude to coordinate with secular bodies, non-Buddhist organizations, and educational institutions. In turn, this expands Buddhism's reach and facilitates connections between Buddhist teachings and contemporary social frameworks. Particularly in Western countries, this model enables BLIA to participate in interfaith dialogue and multicultural celebrations without the limitations that often accompany temple-affiliated organizations.

Another strength of BLIA is its role as a vital bridge between lay practitioners and the monastic community. Venerable Master Hsing Yun famously likened the relationship between Fo Guang Shan and BLIA to the two wings of a bird, distinct yet inseparable, both are essential and must work synchronously for achieving harmony and progress. Since its establishment, BLIA has operated with the active involvement of monastics, ensuring that lay-led initiatives remain grounded in the core values and teachings of Buddhism. Venerable Master Hsing Yun himself delivered keynote speeches at every BLIA General Conference, offering spiritual direction and vision to guide the organization's development. In addition, Guiding Reverends, monastic representatives assigned to BLIA chapters and subchapters, provide continuous spiritual leadership. This symbiotic relationship enables BLIA to engage in community events, educational programs, and humanitarian projects while maintaining fidelity to Buddhist principles. The presence of monastic guidance ensures that the lay organization is not only administratively effective, but also spiritually aligned, preserving the integrity of Humanistic Buddhism in all its endeavors.

From a pedagogical perspective, BLIA plays a crucial role in the dissemination of Buddhist teachings. While monastics deliver Dharma

talks, publish scholarly work, and lead rituals, BLIA members are instrumental in translating these teachings into everyday life. Through structured activities and consistent practice, lay Buddhists learn to incorporate values such as compassion, equanimity, and wisdom into their interpersonal relationships and public service. This synthesis of theory and practice embodies the essence of Humanistic Buddhism, which Venerable Master Hsing Yun described as a way of life that contributes to individual and collective wellbeing.¹⁵

In his *Humanistic Buddhism: A Blueprint for Life*,¹⁶ Venerable Master Hsing Yun emphasized that Buddhism must remain relevant in the contemporary world. He asserted that Buddhist practice should be firmly rooted in the original teachings of the Buddha, purposeful, and socially beneficial. BLIA embodies this vision by organizing activities that resonate not only with Buddhist practitioners, but also with the broader community. From cultural celebrations such as Lunar New Year and major events on the Buddhist calendar like the Buddha's birthday, to environmental clean-up campaigns, plant-based diet advocacy, disaster relief efforts, art exhibitions, and language education programs, BLIA demonstrates that spiritual cultivation can and should actively engage with the concerns of modern society.

An inspiring example of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's leadership in this area was his development of One-Stroke Calligraphy, which he began after losing much of his eyesight due to diabetes. Despite his physical limitations, he continued to serve the community by creating artwork that was later auctioned to raise funds for educational and humanitarian projects.¹⁷ This act of resilience and creativity underscored his belief that Buddhism must adapt and continue to serve regardless of circumstance, a lesson that is deeply ingrained in the ethos of BLIA.

During the founding meeting of BLIA, Venerable Master Hsing Yun stated, "In the past, Buddhism seemed to belong solely to monastics and had little to do with laypeople. The establishment of the Buddha's Light

International Association aimed to transition from monastic Buddhism to a Buddhism for all, from temple-centric Buddhism to a Buddhism that enters society and even each household.” This vision redefined the role of the layperson in the Buddhist community and established a new paradigm for engagement.

In many Fo Guang Shan temples around the world, BLIA members are integral to day-to-day operations. They volunteer as ushers, kitchen helpers, administrative assistants, and event organizers. More importantly, they are teachers in Buddhist youth groups and the Special Religious Education programs in public schools. They serve as cultural ambassadors, helping new immigrants navigate linguistic and cultural barriers through language classes and cultural immersion programs. In doing so, BLIA not only supports the temple, but also extends its impact into the community at large.

One of the most significant contributions of BLIA is its ability to foster interfaith dialogue. Events like the Buddha’s Birthday Celebration, held in public venues and open to the broader community, serve as platforms for government officials, religious leaders, and cultural organizations to learn about and engage with Buddhism.¹⁸ These events not only promote religious literacy, but also build bridges across cultural and spiritual divides. This effort closely aligns with the ideals of multiculturalism as advocated by the Australian government. As a relatively small country with a high proportion of immigrants, Australia relies on social integration to ensure national cohesion and prosperity. The principles of multiculturalism are essential for helping new migrants feel welcomed and secure as they establish their lives in a new environment, while also promoting harmony and mutual respect among the diverse populations that make up Australian society.

In this context, BLIA’s work complements and enhances governmental efforts to cultivate social harmony. Its programs provide cultural and spiritual education, as well as offer a model of community engagement

that is inclusive and cooperative. Recognizing this, various levels of government and multicultural agencies have developed strong working relationships with BLIA. In New South Wales, Australia, the association is frequently invited to participate in roundtable discussions, policy consultations, and community forums. These invitations reflect BLIA's standing as a respected voice in the promotion of interfaith understanding and community cohesion. Furthermore, government bodies often provide BLIA with opportunities to apply for grants and funding in support of cultural and social initiatives, underscoring the organization's role as a key contributor to Australia's multicultural fabric.

BLIA has also gained recognition on a global scale through its consultative status with the United Nations. Its participation in promoting the UN's Sustainable Development Goals reflects the alignment of Buddhist ethics with global humanitarian objectives. This strategic alignment enables BLIA to amplify Buddhist voices in conversations around social justice, climate change, education, and public health.

The abovementioned points show that BLIA is a vital force for the continued propagation of Buddhism. It serves not only as a training ground for lay practitioners and a support structure for monastics, but also as a public representative of Buddhist values in the modern world. Its existence ensures that Buddhism does not become a relic of the past, but continues to be a living, evolving tradition capable of meeting the needs of contemporary society.

Challenges and Growth Opportunities

BLIA, while innovative in its approach and impactful in its mission, faces several notable challenges as it moves further into the twenty-first century. As an organization that focuses on the propagation of Humanistic Buddhism, its relevance and effectiveness depend on its ability to sustain membership, adapt to cultural changes, and bridge generational divides. Despite maintaining a global presence and numerous achievements

in promoting Buddhist values, BLIA must contend with declining membership, generational disconnection, linguistic barriers, and competition from other Buddhist and secular movements.

One of the most pressing challenges is maintaining the growth rate of BLIA membership, particularly in Western societies. While first-generation migrants were often deeply involved in temple life and volunteer activities, subsequent generations have become increasingly disengaged. This is a natural consequence of assimilation into local cultures. Children and grandchildren of immigrants frequently adopt the language, lifestyle, and cultural norms of the broader society in which they live. As a result, they may not find the same emotional or spiritual resonance in temple practices that their elders experienced. The temples, once vibrant community hubs for first-generation migrants, are now seeing dwindling attendance and aging volunteer bases.

An essential factor contributing to this trend is the language barrier. In many BLIA chapters around the world, Chinese remains the primary language used in Dharma talks, chanting, and administrative communication. However, for second-generation members born and raised in non-Chinese-speaking countries, Chinese may no longer be their first language. This creates an obstacle to meaningful participation, particularly in religious and spiritual activities, which often require not just cognitive understanding but emotional engagement. According to Pargament, emotional connection plays a vital role in religious experience and commitment.¹⁹ Without language fluency, younger members may feel alienated from the practices and teachings of Humanistic Buddhism.

Beyond language, cultural divergence presents another layer of complexity. Traditional practices such as honoring ancestors during the Ching Ming and Ullambana festivals are less familiar and less relevant to younger generations who did not grow up with these customs. These rituals, deeply embedded in Confucian and Chinese Buddhist values of filial piety, serve as important moral and spiritual touchstones. Yet, for

many younger members, especially those raised in secular or multicultural societies, such observances may seem archaic or disconnected from their lived experiences. As a result, participation declines, and with it, the transmission of key values central to Humanistic Buddhism.

Recognizing these shifts, Venerable Master Hsing Yun proactively sought to create platforms that could engage younger generations on their own terms. He supported the creation of an international youth initiative in 1996, which became known as BLIA Scouts. This program integrates the ethical values of Humanistic Buddhism—such as service, compassion, and character development—within a globally recognized scouting structure.²⁰ This youth program was designed to integrate Buddhist values with the well-established structure of the global scouts movement. Scouting emphasizes service, ethical living, leadership, and community involvement, principles that align well with the objectives of Humanistic Buddhism. BLIA Scouts provide a socially acceptable, secular framework through which young people can learn about and embody Buddhist values, even if they are not initially drawn to traditional religious activities.

The global spread of BLIA Scouts, including active groups in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Taiwan, demonstrates the potential of this initiative to engage youth across cultural boundaries. Participation in Scouting activities allows youth to interact with local communities, schools, and government organizations, thereby embedding the Buddhist presence more deeply into the social fabric of host countries. Moreover, it provides a pathway for young people to develop a sense of identity and belonging that is grounded in Buddhist ethics but expressed through universally recognized activities.

However, the relationship between BLIA Scouts and the larger BLIA structure remains complex. Due to legal and organizational obligations, BLIA Scouts must adhere to the regulations of their respective national scout associations, which are typically non-religious. This limits the degree to which explicitly religious content can be incorporated into their

programs. Consequently, while BLIA Scouts are effective in introducing young people to Buddhist values, there remains a gap in transitioning these individuals into more formal roles within the broader BLIA organization. Many young people age out of the Scouts without moving into executive or volunteer roles in the main association.

To mitigate this, BLIA needs to develop clearer transitional pathways from youth programs to adult leadership roles. This could include mentorship opportunities, internships, or advisory positions for Scouts alumni. Additionally, creating more inclusive and youth-oriented events within the main organization, delivered in local languages and adapted to modern interests, could encourage continued involvement. If successful, this strategy could rejuvenate the membership base and provide the continuity needed for long-term organizational sustainability.

Another emerging challenge is the rise of secular Buddhism, particularly in Western societies. This movement appeals to individuals who are drawn to Buddhist philosophy and meditation practices but who reject metaphysical beliefs such as karma, rebirth, or the existence of supernatural beings. While secular Buddhists may attend talks, read Buddhist texts, or participate in meditation retreats, they often do not engage with traditional rituals or temple life. This creates a fragmented form of affiliation that, while not antagonistic, diverges from the comprehensive religious and ethical framework that BLIA seeks to promote.

From the perspective of BLIA, secular Buddhism represents both an opportunity and a challenge. On one hand, it introduces Buddhist principles to a wider audience and can serve as a gateway to deeper engagement. On the other hand, it risks diluting the holistic teachings of the Dharma, particularly the emphasis on compassion, rebirth, and spiritual enlightenment. Without these elements, the motivation for sustained practice and ethical living may wane. Moreover, the presence of multiple interpretations and adaptations of Buddhism in the West can lead to competition for resources and members.

In recent decades, numerous other Buddhist organizations have expanded their outreach in Western countries, each offering their own interpretation of the Dharma. Groups associated with Zen, Tibetan, and Theravāda traditions often target the same demographic groups as BLIA, namely, educated, spiritually curious individuals interested in mindfulness, ethical living, and personal growth. This diversification has contributed to a richer and more vibrant Buddhist landscape, but has also fragmented the community. Members may migrate between groups depending on personal preferences, the charisma of teachers, or the accessibility of programs, leading to inconsistencies in membership and volunteerism for any single organization.

Despite these challenges, BLIA remains well-positioned to respond with adaptability and resilience. The foundational philosophy of Humanistic Buddhism, with its emphasis on living the Dharma in everyday life, provides a flexible yet profound framework that resonates across cultures and generations. However, success in the coming decades will depend on the organization's willingness to innovate further: to offer bilingual and culturally sensitive programs, to invest in youth leadership development, and to collaborate with other Buddhist and secular organizations in ways that reinforce rather than dilute its mission.

Future Directions: Strengthening the Organization

Ultimately, the future of BLIA hinges on its ability to adapt to shifting demographic realities while remaining deeply grounded in its core values. Recognizing the evolving needs of their members, particularly the issues of language, cultural relevance, and intergenerational transmission is critical. BLIA must continue its investment in inclusive education, bilingual outreach, and structured dialogue across age groups to strengthen its relevance and enable its mission to resonate across generations. Venerable Master Hsing Yun's vision of a Buddhism that is living, inclusive, and responsive to contemporary needs is reflected in this adaptive approach.²¹ As practicing Buddhists engage with these evolving forms of participation,

BLIA remains both faithful to the Buddha's teachings and forward-looking in its response to societal change.

The path forward for BLIA requires responsiveness to change and a deliberate strategy based on the enduring values of Humanistic Buddhism. As Venerable Master Hsing Yun encapsulated, Humanistic Buddhism is the practice of what the Buddha taught, aligned with the needs and aspirations of people, purified in intention, and wholesome in impact.²² These are not merely slogans, but a blueprint for transformation. In an evolving world, BLIA must proactively reshape its operations and engagements to remain relevant and impactful. Several focus areas can guide this path.

Foremost among these is a deepened collaboration with Buddhist organizations and temples, especially those of the Fo Guang Shan order, to clearly articulate and advocate Humanistic Buddhism as a legitimate and practical path for contemporary life. While many practitioners understand the broad strokes of Humanistic Buddhism, consistent and unified definitions are often lacking. A concerted effort between BLIA and Fo Guang Shan to publish materials, host public forums, and develop training curricula on Humanistic Buddhism will ensure its principles are conveyed accurately and meaningfully. These educational initiatives can help establish Humanistic Buddhism as an everyday practice, demystifying its relevance in daily life, beyond monastic settings.

Providing systematic training for BLIA executive committee members is essential to ensure they cultivate deep faith, develop leadership capabilities, and gain a clear understanding of Humanistic Buddhism. With structured guidance and continuous learning, leaders are better equipped to uphold core values, align their service with the Buddha's teachings, and effectively support the long-term propagation of the Dharma within an evolving society. To achieve this sustainably, it is critical not only to deliver training through traditional Dharma talks, but also to preserve and present this content through modern digital platforms—such as online learning portals, mobile applications, and video archives. By maintaining up-to-

date training materials that incorporate current technologies, BLIA ensures that its teachings remain accessible, relevant, and readily available for future committee members and the wider community. This approach helps standardize knowledge transmission while offering the flexibility needed to engage practitioners across generations and geographic boundaries.

To support the personal development of members, BLIA must also invest in continuous training and education. This includes Dharma education, and also organizational, interpersonal, and leadership training. Regular workshops, retreats, and online courses can upskill members and keep them motivated. Establishing a BLIA Training Academy, either virtually or through regional hubs, could institutionalize these efforts, creating a systematic pipeline for capable leaders and informed members.

A well-defined advancement path within the organization is vital for motivation and stability. Members should understand how they can grow, from general volunteer to committee member, to chapter leader, and even international delegate. Clearly outlined criteria, role descriptions, and rotation mechanisms will professionalize internal mobility. Annual development plans and performance reviews for committee members can also promote accountability and growth.

BLIA must also continue to engage meaningfully with local communities and governmental bodies. This means participating in community development projects, civic dialogues, interfaith programs, and emergency relief work. These engagements not only fulfill Humanistic Buddhism's core goal of benefiting society, but also position BLIA as a trusted partner and moral voice in the public sphere. To sustain this, chapters should appoint dedicated liaisons for community and governmental affairs and offer training to members in civic engagement and policy advocacy.

BLIA can actively engage with government bodies to apply for grants and funding designed to support community programs, multicultural initiatives, mental health, youth development, and interfaith dialogue.

Many governments, including Australia's, offer financial assistance to not-for-profit organizations that demonstrate positive social impact and contribute to social cohesion. By securing this support, BLIA can create structured and sustainable programs that benefit both the Buddhist and wider communities, such as language education, cultural events, environmental activities, and outreach services.

Moreover, access to funding allows the organization to potentially hire administrative staff or project coordinators, reducing the pressure on volunteer committee members who may face limitations due to work, family, or health responsibilities. This financial support ensures that key initiatives are not delayed or cancelled due to a lack of resources or manpower. Instead, BLIA can maintain a consistent presence and service offering, while giving volunteers greater flexibility to contribute in a meaningful yet manageable way. Ultimately, this helps strengthen the organization's capacity and long-term impact in society.

BLIA can also serve as a valuable bridge to unite existing Buddhist groups, particularly in Western countries where many Buddhist communities are smaller and more dispersed than in their countries of origin. By hosting inclusive events such as Vesak Day celebrations, BLIA provides a platform for diverse Buddhist traditions—Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna—to come together in shared reverence for the Buddha's life and teachings. These events foster mutual respect and understanding among different schools, while also presenting a united front that strengthens the visibility and presence of Buddhism in the broader society. In doing so, BLIA helps build a more cohesive and collaborative Buddhist community in the West.

Talent acquisition and retention is another critical pillar. The health of any volunteer organization relies on a constant influx of dedicated, skilled, and mission-aligned individuals. BLIA should broaden its recruitment strategies to include outreach through universities, professional associations, and online platforms. Once engaged, these individuals must be nurtured through mentorship, recognition, and leadership opportunities. Surveys and

regular feedback loops can provide insight into member satisfaction and inform retention strategies. Youth development remains a high priority for the future of BLIA. To ensure continuity and sustained engagement with younger generations, this issue must be addressed through both direct and indirect approaches, each targeting the unique social dynamics and behavioral patterns of today's youth.

From a direct standpoint, BLIA must develop and deliver services, events, and programs that resonate with the interests and needs of young people. Unlike earlier generations, today's youth are deeply influenced by digital culture, fast-paced lifestyles, and a desire for creativity and community. Programs should integrate digital literacy, environmental sustainability, global citizenship, and mental well-being alongside traditional Buddhist values. Partnerships with schools, youth centers, and other community groups can broaden reach. To this end, BLIA chapters should offer activities that are not only educational and rooted in Humanistic Buddhist values, but also appealing and relevant. Examples of such initiatives may include youth-led social innovation workshops, events to allow young people to brainstorm and implement community service projects using Buddhist values as their ethical foundation; outdoor mindfulness retreats that include camps that incorporate meditation, team-building activities and Dharma talks in nature; creative arts competitions to showcase visual arts and express actions for environmental protection and connection to the Dharma. These kinds of engaging, youth-oriented events offer the potential to ignite curiosity, foster emotional connection to Buddhist teachings, and build lasting relationships among peers with shared values.

Indirectly, BLIA can foster youth participation by engaging the entire family unit through family-friendly programs. Activities such as temple open days, community festivals, intergenerational service projects, and cultural events like Lunar New Year and Buddha's Birthday celebrations create accessible entry points for families. These occasions allow parents to involve their children in Buddhist community life in a natural and inclusive way. The social familiarity and routine engagement built through such participation

increase the likelihood of youth retention.

A particularly effective model of this indirect strategy has been the BLIA Scouts program in Australia. Introduced in 2017, this initiative has provided a structured and recognized framework for youth development based on shared values between scouting and Humanistic Buddhism. Parents often serve as scout leaders or adult helpers, participating in scouting activities such as camping, hiking, and service projects alongside their children. This collective involvement fosters stronger family bonds and reinforces Buddhist values through lived experience, rather than solely through doctrinal instruction.

The success of this approach has been evident in the increase in youth participation across all Australian BLIA chapters. However, the crucial turning point in this model lies in creating a seamless transition for youths to “graduate” from BLIA Scouts and continue their involvement by joining BLIA as youth members and eventually as adult committee members. Without this clear progression path, much of the investment in youth engagement may not translate into long-term organizational sustainability. BLIA must therefore continue refining this strategy by establishing mentorship programs, leadership training, and youth-specific roles within the organization. These initiatives will provide a structured path of growth for young members and ensure that the next generation can carry forward the vision of Humanistic Buddhism with conviction, capability, and a sense of belonging.

Maintaining sustainability, both in organizational and financial terms, is a long-term necessity. Structurally, BLIA needs to remain lean yet resilient. Chapters should be empowered with clear governance models that allow adaptability based on local needs. Financially, BLIA should explore the establishment of social enterprises such as bookshops, tea houses, or educational services that generate income while reflecting Buddhist values. Revenue from these ventures can support charitable and educational programs. Additionally, grant writing and donor cultivation should be prioritized, with professional fundraising plans in place.

Conclusion

BLIA, founded by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, represents a visionary evolution in the propagation of Humanistic Buddhism in the modern world. As an organization that bridges the gap between monastics and laypersons, BLIA stands as a unique model that combines spiritual values with a pragmatic organizational structure. This article has explored four key dimensions of BLIA: its organizational structure, its core mission and services, the challenges it faces, and its future directions in an evolving global landscape.

BLIA's organizational structure is a novel contribution to contemporary Buddhism. Unlike traditional Buddhist temples that often rely on informal and transient volunteer support, BLIA formalizes the participation of lay practitioners through a well-defined governance system. It incorporates elected leadership positions, departmental roles, and constitutional mechanisms such as fixed terms. This structure not only ensures operational continuity, but also encourages democratic participation, skill development, and leadership renewal. By positioning lay Buddhists as active participants in Dharma propagation and allowing them to serve in structured roles, BLIA creates a robust, scalable, and sustainable framework for spiritual and organizational growth. Furthermore, the integration of monastics as Guiding Venerables ensures alignment and ethical oversight, maintaining fidelity to the core teachings of the Buddha.

The mission and services of BLIA demonstrate the practical application of Humanistic Buddhism. Founded on the four main objectives—Dharma propagation through culture, talent development through education, community benefit through charity, and spiritual purification through practice—BLIA provides a platform where laypersons can embody and practice Buddhist values in daily life. The association facilitates a broad range of activities such as cultural celebrations, community events, environmental clean-ups, interfaith dialogues, and language education. These initiatives exemplify how spiritual practice can transcend temple walls to address real-world concerns. They also highlight Venerable Master Hsing Yun's vision that Buddhism must

be living, human-centered, and socially engaged.

This article also identifies several challenges that BLIA must address to remain effective. One major issue is generational change, particularly in Western societies where the descendants of first-generation migrants may no longer feel culturally or linguistically connected to traditional temple practices. Language barriers and shifts in cultural customs reduce the engagement of younger members, while the evolving spiritual landscape, including the rise of secular Buddhism and competing Buddhist traditions, diverts attention and resources. Another challenge lies in ensuring the smooth transition of young participants, such as those in BLIA Scouts program, into long-term roles within the organization. Sustaining momentum and fostering leadership among youth remain critical for organizational renewal.

In response to these challenges, the future direction of BLIA must be both adaptive while remaining connected to traditions. As the article outlines, youth development must be approached from both direct and indirect angles. Youth-friendly activities, creative platforms, and digital engagement will appeal to younger demographics, while family-oriented events provide a supportive environment for gradual participation. Furthermore, sustained investment in leadership training, digital education platforms, and social enterprise development can help strengthen BLIA's relevance and reach. Importantly, the association must continue working with local governments, interfaith groups, and broader civil society, leveraging multicultural partnerships to enhance its impact.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun's vision of Humanistic Buddhism emphasizes that Buddhism must respond to the needs of humanity, benefit society, and remain true to the original intent of the Buddha. BLIA operationalizes this vision by providing a structure for laypeople to serve meaningfully, offering programs that integrate faith with action, and nurturing the next generation of leaders. In doing so, it becomes not just a religious organization, but a living embodiment of Buddhist ethics in modern society.

In conclusion, BLIA stands as a transformative model for how Buddhism can thrive in the twenty-first century. By combining a strong organizational structure with a clear mission, by recognizing challenges and strategic planning for the future, the association preserves the legacy of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, and it can continue to serve as a powerful force in the global propagation of Humanistic Buddhism. By building bridges between tradition and modernity, East and West, elder and youth, BLIA not only safeguards the Dharma, but ensures its relevance for future generations.

Notes

- 1 For more on Venerable Master Hsing Yun, see his biography: Fu Chi-ying and Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Handing Down the Light: The Biography of Venerable Master Hsing Yun*, trans. Amy Liu-Ma (Hacienda Heights: Buddha's Light Publishing, 2004). Stuart Chandler's *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspective on Modernization and Globalization* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), Jens Reinke's *Mapping Modern Mahayana* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), and Yao Yushuang & Richard Gombrich, *Chinese Buddhism Today: Conservatism, Modernism, Syncretism and Enjoying Life on the Buddha's Light Mountain* (Bristol: Equinox Publishing, 2022) are three monographs that analyze the development of Fo Guang Shan and its role in the transnationalization of Buddhism. See also Richard Madsen's *Democracy's Dharma—Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
- 2 Jens Reinke, *Mapping Modern Mahayana* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 4.
- 3 James Laidlaw and Jonathan Mair, "Imperfect Accomplishment: The Fo Guang Shan Short-Term Monastic Retreat and Ethical Pedagogy in Humanistic Buddhism," *Cultural Anthropology*, 34(3) (2019): 330.
- 4 James Laidlaw and Jonathan Mair, "Imperfect Accomplishment: The Fo Guang Shan Short-Term Monastic Retreat and Ethical Pedagogy in Humanistic Buddhism," *Cultural Anthropology*, 34(3) (2019): 331. Jens Reinke, *Mapping Modern Mahayana* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 31.
- 5 Shih Miao Guang, "Issues of Acculturation and Globalization Faced by the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order," *Studies on Humanistic Buddhism*, no. 3 (September 2020). <https://journal.nantien.edu.au>.
- 6 Yu-Shuang Yao and Richard Gombrich, "Christianity as Model and Analogue in the Formation of the 'Humanistic' Buddhism of Tai Xu and Hsing Yun," *Buddhist Studies Review*, 34.2 (2017).
- 7 Long Darui, "Humanistic Buddhism from Venerable Tai Xu to Grand Master Hsing Yun," *Hsi Lai Journal of Humanistic Buddhism*, vol. 1 (2000): 63.
- 8 For a discussion of the zero-sum nature of Christianity, see Paul Knitter, "Christianity and the Religions: A Zero-Sum Game? Reclaiming 'The Path Not Taken' and the Legacy of Krister Stendahl," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 46:1 (Winter 2011).
- 9 Shih Miao Guang, "Issues of Acculturation and Globalization Faced by the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order," *Studies on Humanistic Buddhism*, no. 3 (September 2020): 131-132. <https://journal.nantien.edu.au>.

- 10 These mirror the objectives of the Fo Guang Shan order, see <https://www.fgs.org.tw/en/Organizations/Objectives/#:~:text=To%20propagate%20Buddhist%20teachings%20through,and%20minds%20through%20Buddhist%20practices>.
- 11 Li Li'an, "The Brilliant Achievements of Humanistic Buddhism in Australia," *Studies on Humanistic Buddhism*, no. 3 (September 2020): 156-157, <https://journal.nantien.edu.au>.
- 12 Lu Lung-Tan, "Master Hsing Yun: The Pioneering Practitioner of Contemporary Humanistic Buddhism (1927-2023)," *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, vol. 6, issue 2 (February 2023).
- 13 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intents of Buddha* (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2016).
- 14 Long Darui, "Humanistic Buddhism from Venerable Tai Xu to Grand Master Hsing Yun," *Hsi Lai Journal of Humanistic Buddhism*, vol. 1 (2000).
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- 16 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: A Blueprint for Life*, trans. John Balcom (Hacienda Heights: Buddha's Light Publishing, 2008).
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- 18 Shi Juewei and Sioh Yang Tan, "Flows of Innovation in Fo Guang Shan Oceania: Transregional Dynamics Behind the Buddha's Birthday Festival," *Journal of Global Buddhism*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2022).
- 19 Kenneth Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2007).
- 20 Fo Guang Shan Boston, (n.d.) "Fo Guang Scouts," https://fgsbtboston.org/en/scout_en/. Scouts UK, (n.d.) "32nd Stretford Buddha's Light Scout Group," <https://www.scouts.org.uk/groups/12032625?loc=M33&page=8&slug=32nd-Stretford---%27Buddha%27s-Light%27-Scout-Group>.
- 21 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: A Blueprint for Life*, trans. John Balcom (Hacienda Heights: Buddha's Light Publishing, 2008).
- 22 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intents of Buddha* (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2016), v.