

**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**

Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism, Taiwan
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THE IMPACT OF VENERABLE MASTER HSING YUN'S HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM ON BLIA PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's Humanistic Buddhism in the Philippines, particularly from the perspective of members of the Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA). It traces the growth of faith among BLIA members and their commitment to promoting Humanistic Buddhism in the country. It also provides a brief background on the founding of Fo Guang Shan and BLIA in the Philippines, along with an examination of how local Buddhists practice their faith.

The first section introduces Venerable Master Hsing Yun's thought on Humanistic Buddhism to the devotees, the organization's four objectives, and the ways devotees engage in various activities and practices in their daily lives. The article also explores the impact of Humanistic Buddhism on everyday life, particularly how community involvement uplifts devotees and strengthens their faith. In addition, it examines how these teachings influence broader interpersonal relationships, enabling members to connect with mainstream society and encouraging more scholars and local devotees to explore Buddhism.

The article further reflects on gratitude for Venerable Master Hsing Yun and his legacy, emphasizing devotees' commitment to assuming greater responsibility for promoting Humanistic Buddhism in the Philippines. This includes collective efforts to uphold the values of Humanistic Buddhism and recognition of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's contributions to Filipinos through initiatives such as Guang Ming College, the Three Acts of Goodness School Grant, and *Siddhartha the Musical*. In conclusion, the article highlights the importance of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's Humanistic Buddhism in the Philippines and its aspiration to realize a shared vision of peace and happiness for all.

The primary sources consulted for this article include the writings of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, press releases related to BLIA Philippines activities, and interviews with members of BLIA Philippines conducted

through Google Forms and messaging platforms, using materials in either English or Chinese. Given the limited scholarly research on this topic, this article might serve as a valuable resource for future studies.

I. Introduction: The Founding of BLIA Philippines

The establishment and growth of Fo Guang Shan and the Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA) in the Philippines arose from the visionary efforts of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, who made four significant visits to the country beginning in 1963. These visits initiated meaningful exchanges with the local monastic community.

Many Chinese Filipino devotees practice a blend of Catholicism and Buddhism, reflecting a syncretic approach that emphasizes personal spirituality without requiring formal conversion. This has encountered very little resistance in the predominantly Catholic social context of the Philippines.¹

This form of dual religion allows Filipinos to embrace Buddhism alongside their existing beliefs. Venerable Master Hsing Yun regarded this as acceptable, and it contributed to Fo Guang Shan expansion in Catholic and Muslim countries.² The founding of Chu Un Temple in Cebu in 1989 marked a pivotal moment, opening new opportunities for Fo Guang Shan to propagate the Dharma and benefit people in the Philippines. Chu Un Temple became the point of origin for Fo Guang Shan's Dharma propagation in the country. Out of gratitude and devotion to their mother, Paterno and Rosita Luym of Cebu City donated the land and built a temple on a 1.4 hectare lot in her memory. Construction of the temple was completed in 1988, and Fo Guang Shan monastics were invited to promote Dharma and benefit sentient beings. In March of 1989, Venerable Tzu Jung was officially appointed abbess, and Venerable Yung Guang (current head abbess of Fo Guang Shan Philippines) was appointed temple superintendent.³

BLIA Philippines was formally established in 1995 during Venerable Master Hsing Yun's visit, when he presided over a board meeting and delivered

a Dharma talk to more than four thousand attendees. Venerable Master Hsing Yun described Fo Guang Shan and BLIA as “two arms of a person” or “two wings of a bird,” essential and complementary forces in spreading Humanistic Buddhism.⁴

Under the leadership of its first president, Venerable Yung Guang, the initial meeting of the Board of Directors was held at the Philippine International Convention Center. The inaugural leadership team included President Venerable Yung Guang and Vice Presidents Dr. Michael Lao and Angela Carlos. Since then, members of BLIA Philippines, also known as the Fo Guang people or BLIA members, have formed a faith-based community that fully supports Fo Guang Shan Philippines, serving as an additional “wing” in the propagation of Humanistic Buddhism in this predominantly Catholic country.

BLIA Philippines has since grown into a faith-based community comprising eighteen subchapters, including four Young Adult Divisions. These groups bring diverse strengths in culture, education, event organization, and volunteer service, working under the guidance of the monastics to propagate a contemporary and engaged form of Humanistic Buddhism. Its main objective has remained the integration of Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s teachings into the social framework of the Philippines. This process entails adapting the tenets of Humanistic Buddhism to a distinct cultural context in which interfaith harmony is not merely an aspiration but an everyday reality.

II. Faith in Action: Personal Transformation and Lay Practice

The personal journeys of BLIA members illustrate the profound impact of Humanistic Buddhism on both their faith and daily lives. The membership is composed primarily of Chinese Filipinos, for whom Buddhist practice is often intertwined with cultural identity and ancestor worship. Fo Guang Shan has sought to simplify traditional Chinese Buddhist practices by emphasizing meditation and community service, thereby making the Dharma accessible to both Chinese Filipinos and the wider non-Chinese population and fostering a

spirit of inclusivity.⁵

Longtime members vividly recount the transformative power of Humanistic Buddhist practice. BLIA Dharma Lecturer Christine Tan described how her journey began without faith but was awakened through the influence of her family and the guidance of Venerable Yung Guang. Through chanting, she found peace and developed a deep commitment to sharing the Dharma.⁶ She further explained that Venerable Master Hsing Yun advocated Humanistic Buddhism by encouraging active engagement with the world through Fo Guang Shan's many activities. This approach enriches our lives by uniting understanding with practice and by reminding us to apply the Buddha's teachings in our daily lives, since the Dharma is the ultimate truth.⁷

BLIA Philippines has been led in succession by Venerable Yung Guang, Michael Lao, Leo Ang, Agnes Uygongco, Albert Teh, Maria Teh, Sonny Lee, Erwin Choa, and Kathy Lim.

Dr. Michael Lao, the inaugural vice president of BLIA Philippines, emphasized the role of Humanistic Buddhism in daily life, particularly its ability to foster compassion and collective faith through Venerable Master Hsing Yun's four pillars: education, culture, charity, and spiritual cultivation. Key initiatives such as the Three Acts of Goodness in schools, the internationally staged *Prince Siddhartha the Musical*, and Guang Ming College's scholarship programs demonstrate this practical and transformative influence. His own involvement deepened his understanding of how shared effort and compassion strengthen both personal practice and the wider community.⁸

For Dharma lecturer Mary Yap, Venerable Master Hsing Yun's teachings—"never forget your initial aspiration," "act willingly without regret," and "serve others and cultivate good connections"—have inspired deep humility and lifelong service. She lives according to practical principles: the Three Acts of Goodness (do good deeds, speak good words, think good thoughts), the Four Givings (give confidence, joy, hope, and convenience), and the Five

Harmonies (individual harmony achieved through joy; interpersonal harmony through respect; family harmony through deference; social harmony through cooperation; and world harmony through peace). Through Humanistic Buddhism, she moved from having ample free time to becoming a temple volunteer, a BLIA leader, and eventually a Dharma lecturer. Her life is now busier but far more meaningful.⁹

Agnes Uygongco, former BLIA Philippines president and deputy director of the Charity Committee, credits Humanistic Buddhism and Venerable Master Hsing Yun's teachings for transforming her outlook and relationships, a change acknowledged even by her family. She applies these principles by seeking holistic solutions to conflict and by promoting the universal values of the Three Acts of Goodness through literature and interfaith reading groups. Her goal is to share this wisdom to inspire constructive action at all levels of society.¹⁰

Leadership within BLIA is understood as a form of Dharma protection, that is, a selfless commitment to supporting the *saṅgha*. Figures such as the late Albert Teh and his wife Mary Tiutoc Teh exemplified this ideal through significant contributions to educational and charitable projects and through critical assistance during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹

For current leaders such as President Kathy Lim, practice takes the form of patience, compassion, and humility, together with a focus on community-oriented projects that benefit society as a whole.¹²

Dharma Lecturer Sonny Lee, former head of BLIA Philippines' Elder Advisor Committee, is inspired by Venerable Master Hsing Yun's lifelong dedication and teachings. He embodies the principle that the meaning of life is found in service, dedication, and forming affinities. He considers it his greatest honor to have contributed to temple and school projects, through which he has witnessed the truth, goodness, and beauty of Humanistic Buddhism, strengthened his family, and deepened his own faith.¹³

Former president Erwin Choa finds Humanistic Buddhism deeply practical, offering daily guidance that inspires him to share it widely. He has observed its transformative effects in settings such as sports events, where shared living fosters cultural exchange and positive changes in attitude. He notes how players who were once self-centered eventually began requesting meditation and helping with chores. Such experiences have convinced him that practical engagement is an effective means of conveying Buddhist philosophy, reinforcing the idea that filling the mind with wholesome “stock” leaves no space for negativity.¹⁴

III. Beyond the Community: Integrating into Mainstream Society

A key strategy of Fo Guang Shan Philippines has been deliberate and thoughtful acculturation: integrating Buddhist practice into the mainstream of Philippine society without requiring religious conversion. As analyzed by Venerable Miao Guang, this approach entails long-term adaptation and the negotiation of a dual identity—maintaining core Buddhist culture while also accepting and contributing to the nation’s religious diversity.¹⁵

The primary engines of this acculturation have been education and the arts. The establishment of Guang Ming College as the first Humanistic Buddhist college in the Philippines, offering scholarships and degree programs in performing arts and Buddhist studies to students of all faiths, is a landmark achievement. In addition, a partnership with the Philippine Department of Education since 2016 has integrated the Three Acts of Goodness into the moral curriculum of more than three hundred public schools, earning official recognition and influencing countless young Filipinos.¹⁶

In the cultural sphere, *Prince Siddhartha the Musical*, performed largely by Catholic artists and staged internationally for seventeen years, represents a unique achievement in presenting the Buddha’s life through a medium deeply rooted in local culture. These initiatives have been further bolstered by Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s one-stroke calligraphy, the proceeds of which provided funding for such educational and cultural endeavors.¹⁷

BLIA's role in this process of acculturation has been active and multifaceted. Its members serve as the indispensable driving force behind the extraordinary range of community activities. Archival records suggest nearly two hundred documented initiatives annually, though the actual number is likely significantly higher. Their work gives concrete expression to the Five Harmonies through a diverse array of programs. These include interfaith dialogues and prayer sessions for peace, participation in cultural heritage festivals such as Cebu's *Gabii sa Kabilin* through traditional performances and exhibits, and the fostering of local goodwill by hosting neighborhood Christmas parties for Christian communities. Bathing the Buddha events are organized by various subchapters outside the temple in order to engage with the broader public.¹⁸ Lunar New Year celebrations likewise serve as occasions for cultural exchange.¹⁹

Charity forms another essential pillar of this engagement, demonstrating compassion through concrete action. BLIA chapters are often among the first to respond, organizing rapid disaster relief and distributing essential supplies to thousands of families affected by typhoons and floods. They also promote health and environmental awareness through annual charity vegetarian runs, and have maintained a decade-long commitment to donating vital medical equipment and supplies to major public hospitals. In addition, their service extends to regular outreach programs, including free medical and dental clinics in underserved communities, conducting year-end distributions of food and goods to nearly four hundred underprivileged families, educational support through book and school supply donations, and mobile library programs for youth and children. Much of this large-scale local charity is carried out entirely by BLIA volunteers who donate both their time and money. It demonstrates the tangible social benefits of Humanistic Buddhism. Because BLIA serves people without seeking conversion, it has earned great respect and has become a valued and enduring presence in the Philippines.²⁰

IV. Growing Together: Encouraging Local Participation

In addition to its faith-based community, Fo Guang Shan has also

established a secular Humanistic Research Center in the Philippines. The future of Humanistic Buddhism in the Philippines is being strengthened through strategic institutional development and the cultivation of local Filipino talent. A significant step in this direction was the establishment in 2022 of the Philippines Humanistic Buddhism Center, a research initiative launched by Venerable Yung Guang under the guidance of Venerable Miao Guang. The center seeks to deepen the intellectual and philosophical propagation of the Dharma through systematic and localized research conducted by Filipino scholars, thereby ensuring the teachings remain both relevant and accessible.²¹

This commitment to localization is also evident in the development of human capital. Fo Guang Shan and BLIA have made a concerted effort to identify and nurture Filipino talent in the arts, education, and athletics. The success of Guang Ming University's sports teams and the international performances of the *Siddhartha* troupe are testaments to this sustained investment.²²

Are assimilation and acculturation necessary in the Catholic Philippines? In her article "Issue of Acculturation and Globalization Faced by the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order," Venerable Miao Guang examines how Humanistic Buddhism, as advocated by Fo Guang Shan's founder, Venerable Master Hsing Yun, has undergone acculturation in a wide range of cultural settings across the world. Her article assesses Fo Guang Shan's developments in these contexts, discussing both successful and unsuccessful strategies of acculturation, changes in approaches to Dharma propagation, and the acculturative stresses experienced in the process. She cites Fo Guang Shan in the Philippines as an example of assimilation. In a Roman Catholic country, Buddhism cannot develop without a mutual acceptance of diversity, even while maintaining its own culture. In this context, long-term adaptation appears necessary.²³

Another notable initiative of BLIA Philippines has been its effort to attract more young members, particularly entrepreneurs. BLIA Philippines hosted the Young Entrepreneurs' Network (YEN) at Fo Guang Shan Mabuhay Temple, drawing more than one thousand participants. The event featured

forums with successful young entrepreneurs and was designed to inspire and support young people in their entrepreneurial pursuits. Major companies also expressed their support and encouraged participants to pursue their aspirations.²⁴

A second-generation devotee, Scott So, former president of BLIA Young Adults Division Manila, shared that although his mother was busy earning a living, she remained actively involved in temple activities. From a young age, Scott followed her to the temple, where he learned from the monastics and fellow volunteers the value of helping others. He often noticed less fortunate children near the temple and wondered how he might help them. He began organizing weekend movie nights where children learned about kindness and good deeds. These children eagerly attended and shared what they learned with their families.²⁵

The vision for the future, articulated by lay devotees and monastics alike, is one of sustained growth rooted in the compassionate and selfless spirit of Venerable Master Hsing Yun. Venerable Yung Guang emphasized that Humanistic Buddhism has made significant inroads in the Philippines through education, charity, and cultural activities. These efforts have led to the creation of schools and a university that positively shape young lives. Under the guidance of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, initiatives like the *Prince Siddhartha the Musical* and various sports programs have engaged predominantly Catholic communities and fostered interfaith harmony. These efforts, founded on selfless giving and compassion, create a cycle of goodwill in which those who are uplifted go on to help others.²⁶

In her talk to BLIA members in the Philippines, Venerable Miao Jing emphasized the “mind of a practitioner,” which includes self-confidence, empathy, joy, and compassion. She highlighted BLIA’s role in promoting Humanistic Buddhism through education and charitable works in ways that empower Filipinos and enhance societal well-being.²⁷

The continued operation of Guang Ming College and the Three Acts of

Goodness schools promises to continue transforming lives through education. Under the leadership of Venerable Yung Guang and Venerable Miao Jing, the monastics continue to encourage the community to broaden its horizons, engage in diligent practice, and recruit new members. BLIA members in the Philippines remain committed to this journey with gratitude, focusing on purifying minds and fostering a more harmonious society. The path ahead represents a collective vow to honor the Master's legacy by assuming greater responsibility. Members are confident that the foundations laid over the past three decades will support the growth of Humanistic Buddhism for generations to come.

V. With Gratitude: Honoring Venerable Master Hsing Yun

A survey conducted via Google Forms gathered responses from thirty-four members of BLIA Philippines, the majority of whom are over fifty years of age, including thirteen who were sixty-five or older. This profile underscores the wisdom and depth of experience within this faith-based organization. The primary avenue of membership in BLIA was through personal connections: friends or relatives introduced eighteen members. Others discovered the organization through attendance at Dharma services or through involvement in educational, cultural, and charitable projects. This pattern is also reflected in their tenure, with many respondents having proudly belonged for sixteen years or more, and others for eleven to fifteen years. While most identified exclusively as Buddhists, the community also reflects a spirit of interfaith harmony, with some members combining Buddhist practices with those of Catholicism or Taoism. The activities most frequently attended, in order of popularity, were Dharma services, educational programs, cultural events, and charity initiatives, followed by the Bathing of the Buddha ceremony, meditation sessions, and book discussions.

The open-ended responses revealed a deep appreciation for the community and teachings of BLIA. Members shared that their most meaningful experiences arose from serving others, participating in collaborative efforts, learning the Dharma, and building meaningful affinities. They drew inspiration from the

teachings of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, particularly his core principles: the Three Acts of Goodness, the Four Givings, and the Five Harmonies. These principles resonate with the ideals of acculturation and the promotion of Humanistic Buddhism, especially in Venerable Master Hsing Yun's emphasis on tolerance and respect.

Members consistently cited Venerable Master Hsing Yun's selflessness, compassion, and perseverance in the face of challenges as profoundly inspiring qualities, alongside his dedication to making Buddhist education accessible to all. To further advance Humanistic Buddhism in the Philippines, they proposed several strategies, including integrating the Three Acts of Goodness into educational curricula, localizing teachings in both English and Tagalog, engaging in interfaith dialogue, and modeling positive values through volunteer service. Represented by subchapters throughout the archipelago, this compassionate and dedicated community remains firmly committed to realizing Venerable Master Hsing Yun's vision through service, education, and daily practice, thereby expressing their heartfelt gratitude.

BLIA President Kathy Lim emphasized the profound impact of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's teachings on graduates of Guang Ming College. Many of these individuals, now working for international companies, embody the principles of the Three Acts of Goodness in ways that shape their character and make them outstanding professionals.²⁸

Venerable Master Hsing Yun expressed great hope for the future of Buddhism in the Philippines. He recalled that, fifty years earlier, a Philippine president had welcomed the diversity that multiple religions would bring to the country.²⁹ He further observed that the free flourishing of religions in the Philippines, together with the liberty of faith enjoyed by all, forms the very cornerstone of the nation's promising future.³⁰

VI. Conclusion: The Path Forward

As BLIA Philippines reflects on three decades of remarkable growth, the

legacy of Venerable Master Hsing Yun continues to shine brightly through the spirit of its members, a spirit defined by unwavering volunteerism and deep devotion.³¹ Their service, grounded in the “3-4-5” framework of the Three Acts of Goodness, the Four Givings, and the Five Harmonies, has driven the meaningful acculturation of Humanistic Buddhism in the Catholic-majority Philippines. Through selfless action, whether in organizing disaster relief, promoting interfaith dialogue, or supporting education, BLIA members have embodied the Venerable Master’s vision, demonstrating that Buddhism flourishes not through doctrine alone, but through compassionate engagement.

The integration of Humanistic Buddhism into Philippine society stands as a testament to this collective effort. By embracing localization through education at Guang Ming College, cultural productions such as the *Prince Siddhartha the Musical*, Three Acts of Goodness schools, and a wide range of educational, cultural, artistic, interreligious, and charitable initiatives, BLIA has built bridges of understanding and respect across religious boundaries. This process of acculturation highlights a shared pursuit of universal values rather than religious conversion, fostering a society in which diversity is celebrated and harmony is actively cultivated.

Although Venerable Master Hsing Yun is deeply missed, his presence endures in the hearts of BLIA members throughout the Philippines who continue to walk the path he illuminated. As he expressed so profoundly:

With a heart filled with compassion and vows to save
others,
My body is like the ocean of Dharma, unbound;
Should you ask what have I achieved in this lifetime?
Peace and happiness now shine over the five
continents.³²

Guided by these words, BLIA Philippines moves forward with a global vision and local commitment, striving to build a purer land where wisdom and compassion prevail. Once a BLIA member, always a BLIA member: united

in purpose, boundless in spirit, and eternal in gratitude to Venerable Master Hsing Yun, who lives on in every deed of kindness and every act of peace.

Notes

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