

**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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TOWARD A BUDDHOCENTRIC ENVIRONMENTALISM: HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM AND THE CULTIVATION OF A PURE LAND ON EARTH

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Abstract

Venerable Master Hsing Yun and the Fo Guang Shan order propose a distinctive alternative to environmentalism that is neither strictly anthropocentric nor simply biocentric. Its orientation is explicitly soteriological: to reconfigure humanity's relationship to the environment as a mode of Buddhist practice known as "Working Chan." For this reason, such an approach may best be described as "Buddhocentric." Environmental awareness and protection, in this framework, become integral to realizing a pure land on earth, through the purification of the mind that perceives and engages with the natural world.

Introduction

"The museum is like a temple" is part of the title of an article that investigates how Fo Guang Shan's (FGS) Buddha Museum in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, employs material engagement with religious artifacts and architectural design to generate embodied experience, foster the transformation of inner spirituality, and articulate FGS's vision of establishing the Museum as a means of conveying Buddhist ideology to visitors through its exhibition space and sacred materials.¹ In a similar way, one may describe FGS's approach to environmentalism as centered on the theme that "protecting the environment is like protecting the pure land." The environmentalism taught by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, founder of FGS, derives from the Humanistic Buddhist vision of cultivating the pure land in this very world (*renjian jingtu* 人間淨土). Although the "human realm" is emphasized, this form of environmentalism is neither anthropocentric nor biocentric. Perhaps the most appropriate way to understand FGS's environmentalism is "Buddhocentric," that is, as a spiritual practice directed toward the cultivation of wisdom and compassion, with environmental protection arising as a natural outcome.

Buddha-Nature in Nature

This vision is exemplified in an anthology of writings on environmentalism by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, who observes that “[h]eaven and earth”—that is, nature, which “nurture and support all life—are like the pure and pervasive Dharma body of the Buddha, which possesses infinite virtues and limitless wondrous uses.”² As explicated in the Buddhist *sūtras*, the obscured form (*samālā tathatā*) of the Dharma body (*Dharmakāya*) is the Buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*) found in all sentient beings. The passage from Venerable Master Hsing Yun therefore does not simply invoke “heaven and earth” as metaphors for a transcendent reality but rather underscores their potential to nurture the Buddha-nature that inheres within all forms of existence. What is distinctive here is the way the text reflects a uniquely Buddhist interpretation: Buddha-nature is not limited to sentient beings but extends to the entirety of the natural world, including grasses and trees, rivers, and mountains. This expansive vision is reflected in the very structure of Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s *Embracing Nature*, quoted above, whose chapter titles include such formulations as “Flowers, Grasses, and Trees All Possess Buddha-Nature,” “Animals of the Land, Sea, and Air All Possess Buddha-Nature,” “The Mountains, Rivers, and Earth Are All the Buddha’s Essence,” and “The Sun, Moon, Wind, and Lightning Are All the Buddha’s Tools.” In this way, Venerable Master Hsing Yun articulates a vision of Buddha-nature that embraces the cosmos in its fullness, natural and elemental, animate and inanimate alike. This broader application resonates with the thought of exegetes such as Jizang 吉藏 (549–623), a principal patriarch of the Sanlun School 三論宗 who sought to synthesize Mādhyamaka emptiness with Buddha-nature thought. Jizang wrote, “If sentient beings have Buddha-nature, then grasses and trees also have Buddha-nature; by this principle, therefore, not only do sentient beings have Buddha-nature, but grasses and trees likewise have Buddha-nature.”³

Many Buddhist sources, including the Pāli canon and the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, distinguish between “sentient” and “insentient” beings. The former generally designates unenlightened beings composed of the five aggregates

(*skandha*) and subject to suffering (*dukkha*) within *samsāra*, while the latter encompasses entities such as trees and grasses, which are regarded as devoid of emotions, mind, or consciousness. Yet, as Lambert Schmithausen has demonstrated, the sharp bifurcation between sentient and insentient beings represents a later consolidation within Buddhist doctrinal development. Early canonical texts often include plants, classified as stationary beings (*thāvara*) in contrast to mobile beings (*tasa*), within the broader category of animate beings (*pāṇa*). This classification not only presupposes a form of sentience but also underlies injunctions against harming or killing plants, as well as instructions to extend loving-kindness (*mettā*) toward them. Schmithausen further observes that the grouping of mobile and stationary beings as “animate beings” is also found in early Jain and Vedic traditions, suggesting that early Buddhists shared a similar worldview, particularly in cultivating the ideal of non-violence (*ahiṃsā*). The subsequent doctrinal distinction between sentient and insentient beings was, in his view, introduced in order to account more coherently for the workings of *karma*.⁴

Scientific studies such as Monica Gagliano’s *Thus Spoke the Plant* suggest that certain plants are capable of associative learning, retain memories of past events, and may even emit and perceive sounds as a form of communication.⁵ While her research has generated considerable debate, including concerns about the anthropomorphizing of plant behavior, the possibility that observed responses are mechanistic biological adaptations rather than cognition, and problems of reproducibility in some, it nonetheless invites attention to the dimensions of plant behavior and bioacoustics that have remained largely unacknowledged. In doing so, Gagliano’s work raises important questions about the categories through which we understand sentience, intelligence, memory, and learning. Equally striking is her integration of Indigenous wisdom and spiritual experience into scientific inquiry. Although controversial within the scientific community, this approach opens a provocative interdisciplinary space that resonates with the cosmological and ethical assumptions of the broader Indian worldview before and during the formative period of early Buddhism.

Such plant behaviors, however, do not themselves constitute proof that plants possess consciousness or mind. The doctrinal implications of claiming that plants have Buddha-nature therefore remain highly contested. Within the writings of patriarchs and lineage masters of what Schmithausen refers to as “Far Eastern Buddhism,” one finds arguments that extend Buddha-nature to all *dharma*s as their true nature. The Tiantai patriarch Zhanran 湛然 (711–782), for example, famously posed the challenge in his *Jingang bei* 金剛鉞 (Vajra Scalpel): “If you believe insentient beings do not have Buddha-nature, would that not entail the position that the ten thousand phenomena lack suchness?”⁶ In some strands of East Asian thought, this reasoning was further developed to the point of suggesting that plants themselves are capable of becoming Buddhas. A case in point is *Taizō Kongō Bodai-shin Gi Ryaku Monda-shō* 胎藏金剛菩提心義略問答鈔 (*Notes on the Essentials of the Meaning of the Womb and Vajra Bodhicitta in Question-and-Answer Form*), in which the ninth-century Tendai monk Annen 安然 (841–889?) cites, “The *Zhongyin jing* 中陰經 (*Sūtra of the Intermediate State*) says: ‘When Śākyamuni attained enlightenment, all grasses and trees became the Buddha’s body. Each body, sixteen feet tall, expounded the Dharma.’”⁷ Yet, upon consulting the *Zhongyin jing*, one does not in fact find such a passage.

The suggestion that insentient beings possess Buddha-nature inevitably raises the question of whether such beings might, in fact, be considered sentient: endowed with the capacity to expound the Dharma, attain Buddhahood, possess consciousness, thereby falling within the scope of *karma* and rebirth. As Karin Meyers observes, “Though I am personally inclined to think of some or maybe all plants as in some way sentient and as free of the kinds of suffering we humans experience, I must confess that it seems odd (and more than a little anthropocentric) to think of plants as subject to karma and rebirth or to place them on a hierarchy of beings according to the quality of their karma.”⁸

Perception of Nature from a Pure Mind

The claim that mountains, rivers, and vegetation possess Buddha-nature because true suchness pervades them has often struck critics as counterintuitive,

as Karin Meyers notes. Yet, the doctrinal premise is straightforward: suchness (*tathatā*) pervades all phenomena. Both the sentient and the insentient therefore equally embody it, in line with Indian Mahāyāna thought. For this reason, the *Dasheng xuanlun* 大乘玄論 (*Profound Treatise on the Mahāyāna*) records a disciple's objection: "If grass and trees have Buddha-nature and thus become Buddhas, this would be a momentous claim and should not be uttered lightly, lest it provoke astonishment." Jizang dismissed this as "the ignorance of the ill-informed" (*shaowen duoguai* 少聞多怪), clarifying with Yogācāra reasoning: "'Consciousness-only' means no external realm exists [independently]. Mountains, rivers, grasses, and trees are all but projections of mind; outside the mind there are no separate *dharmas*. This reveals that all *dharmas*, internal and external, are nondual as supporting and supported. Because of this nonduality, if sentient beings have Buddha-nature, then grass and trees too have Buddha-nature. For this reason, not only do sentient beings have Buddha-nature, but grass and trees also have Buddha-nature."⁹

This logic parallels the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, which proclaims, "The purity of his profound mind relies on Buddha wisdom and therefore is able to perceive the purity of this Buddha land."¹⁰ In other words, phenomena perceived through a deluded and discriminating mind appear defiled, while those seen through the non-discriminating purity of mind are revealed as pure lands. By the same reasoning, when practitioners realize their inherent Buddha-nature by purifying their minds, all that they encounter, whether sentient beings within the six destinies or the very landscapes of mountains and rivers, manifests as expressions of Buddha-nature. This is likely what Venerable Master Hsing Yun meant when he explained the following:

If the outer world were separated from the conscious mind's ability to make distinctions, then there would be no meaning and no substance. Only when the mind is present is there a world. If the mind's consciousness is absent, then the presence of the world cannot be felt. [...]

When one realizes that one's mind is the Buddha, one understands that the mountains, rivers, earth, trees, and flowers will all become Buddha along with us, creating pure Buddha lands as a result. "The ocean does not reject water, so it grows vast; the mountains do not turn rocks and soil away, so they grow great." From the formation and appearance of the mountains, rivers, and earth, to their supporting and nurturing of all sentient beings, to their contribution to spiritual culture, all of nature speaks the Dharma, and all of nature manifests the compassionate Buddha's body.¹¹

Venerable Master Hsing Yun introduces the doctrine of universal Buddha-nature through a pedagogically skillful progression. He begins with the accessible claim that plants and flowers are "imbued with feeling" and exhibit qualities of perseverance and diligence—a perspective reminiscent of Monica Gagliano's explorations of plant sentience. He then extends the point to animals, describing terrestrial, aquatic, and avian creatures as capable of "profound sentiment and deep righteousness." Only after establishing this broader framework does he present the more philosophically demanding proposition that mountains, rivers, and the Earth itself constitute the Buddha's essence. In this way, Venerable Master Hsing Yun does not simply affirm a transcendental vision of Buddha-nature pervading all things; he simultaneously highlights the impermanent and interdependent character of existence. It is precisely this recognition of ephemerality and relationality, he suggests, that enables humanity to envision and cultivate a "pure land" on Earth.

Impermanence and Buddha-Nature

At first glance, "impermanence" and "Buddha-nature" may appear contradictory, as Buddhist *sūtras* often describe the latter as permanent and unchanging. The *Platform Sūtra*, however, offers a strikingly different perspective. There, the Sixth Patriarch Huineng 惠能 (638–713) unequivocally declares, "That which is impermanent is the Buddha-nature. That which has

permanence is all the good and evil dharmas and the mind of discrimination.”¹² This radical inversion, equating impermanence with Buddha-nature, challenges conventional categories and carries the paradoxical quality of a Chan *gong'an*. Huineng continues as follows:

The master said, “Do you understand? If the Buddha-nature were permanent, then no matter what good and evil dharmas one explained, not a single person throughout the entire eon would generate bodhicitta. Therefore, I preach that it is impermanent. This is precisely the Way of true permanence preached by the Buddha. Furthermore, if all the dharmas were impermanent, then everything would have its own self-nature that would experience birth and death, and those true and permanent natures would not be omnipresent. Therefore, I preach that they are permanent, which is precisely the true doctrine of impermanence preached by the Buddha.

Because ordinary people and heretics are attached to false permanence and those of the two vehicles consider permanence to be impermanence, together forming the eight confusions, the Buddha in the authoritative teaching of the Nirvana [Sutra] destroyed their prejudices and revealed his explanation of true permanence, the true bliss, the true self, and true purity. You are now relying on the words but going against the meaning. With an annihilationist impermanence and a deterministic permanence, you have misunderstood the Buddha’s last words, which are perfect, wondrous, and subtle. What benefit can there be in reading [the sutra] a thousand times?”¹³

A similar interpretive strategy appears in Venerable Master Hsing Yun's *Embracing Nature*, where he emphasizes both the Buddha-nature inherent in all living beings and their inevitable impermanence. He situates his reflections within Buddhist cosmology, describing how each of the innumerable "three-thousandfold world systems" undergoes the successive stages of formation, abiding, decay, and dissolution. This macrocosmic vision is mirrored at the microcosmic level in the life cycle of sentient beings, who experience birth, aging, sickness, and death. These parallel cycles reveal the universality of impermanence. Yet, as Venerable Master Hsing Yun stresses, impermanence does not stand alone: All phenomena arise and perish through their mutual interdependence on causes and conditions.

As John Becker concludes, "The synergy between these potent teachings establishes an interdependent world of transitoriness that elucidates an ontological affinity between sentient beings and their environment."¹⁴ This insight illuminates the Mahāyāna conception of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), understood not as nihilism but as the relational nature of suchness (*tathatā*), the fundamental essence of the natural world. Crucially, Venerable Master Hsing Yun further identifies this essence as inseparable from the workings of the human mind:

The one Dharma is the one mind. This mind embraces all mundane and supramundane teachings. It is the teaching of the one dharma realm embracing all phenomena. It is only because of delusions that there are distinctions. Away from delusion, all that is left are things as they are [suchness].¹⁵

Read in this light, *Embracing Nature* may be seen as a contemporary re-appropriation of Huineng's Chan teaching that "that which is impermanent is the Buddha-nature." Venerable Master Hsing Yun's exposition not only echoes the Sixth Patriarch's paradoxical formulation but also situates it within a modern ecological and cosmological framework. This vision resonates with the teaching of the Japanese Zen master Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253),

whose *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏 (*Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*) repeatedly underscores the inseparability of impermanence and Buddha-nature:

[T]he very impermanence of grass and tree, thicket and forest is the Buddha-nature. The very impermanence of people and things, body and mind is the Buddha-nature. Lands and nations, mountains and rivers are impermanent because they are Buddha-nature.¹⁶

Dōgen further explains:

As for “all sentient beings,” in the Buddha Way all things possessed of mind are called sentient beings, because mind is, as such, sentient being. Things not possessed of mind are also sentient beings, because sentient beings are, as such, mind. Hence, all mind is sentient being, and sentient beings all are being Buddha-nature. Grass and tree, nation and state are mind. Because they are mind, they are sentient being. Because they are sentient being, they are being Buddha-nature. Sun, moon, stars, and planets are mind. Because they are mind, they are sentient being. Because they are sentient being, they are being Buddha-nature.¹⁷

Working Chan

This distinctive Chan/Zen interpretation of Buddha-nature provides the foundation for Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s teaching on environmental protection, embodied at FGS in the praxis known as “Working Chan.” Venerable Master Hsing Yun summarized this practice succinctly: “No working means no food. Chan practice is combined with daily work.”¹⁸ The point is that Chan cultivation is not limited to seated meditation but is to be integrated into all

dimensions of daily life, particularly through labor and service.¹⁹ What makes FGS's environmental engagement distinctive is precisely this integration: The emphasis lies not simply on ecological activism but on realizing the Dharma through work. At the heart of "Working Chan" is the conviction that "the spirit of Chan is found in the committed, fearless, and diligent performance of one's duties, undertaken with faith in one's own Buddha-nature."²⁰

From another perspective, the ecological praxis of "Working Chan" is neither anthropocentric, concerned merely with the consequences of environmental degradation for human well-being, nor strictly biocentric, premised solely on the intrinsic value of preserving biodiversity. Instead, it is first and foremost a mode of Chan meditative cultivation. Engagement with the environment becomes a vehicle for realizing one's Buddha-nature, and through that realization, for embodying the Mahāyāna vision of establishing a pure land on earth—a state of the pure mind that perceives the purity of this buddhfield. Venerable Master Hsing Yun clarifies this as follows:

Chan is facing the reality of life. It takes hard work, effort to maintain resolve, strength and courage. You have to grow roots in life, then gradually elevate and expand yourself. Your spirit can rise to the heavens, but your feet must remain on the ground.²¹

Conclusion

A salient example of how FGS operationalizes this form of environmentalism is seen in the construction of the FGS Monastery and the FGS Buddha Museum in Taiwan. Both projects involved extensive research and planning to ensure that sacred space would be harmoniously integrated with forested and landscaped environments. Their architectural design intentionally incorporated principles of sustainable environmental stewardship, not only to regulate the ecological impact of tourism but also to promote responsible environmental management and the conservation of cultural heritage.²² In this way, spiritual practice and ecological consciousness

were not treated as separate concerns but were fully interwoven into the very fabric of these monumental religious and administrative centers, embodying Venerable Master Hsing Yun's vision of "Working Chan" as praxis.

Philosophical and ethical approaches to environmental conservation are often framed in terms of the tension between anthropocentrism and biocentrism. The former prioritizes preserving the natural world primarily for human welfare, while the latter emphasizes the intrinsic value of non-human life and the ecosphere as a whole. Critics of anthropocentrism have argued that it cannot generate a sustainable ethic, as its egocentric orientation remains bound to human utility and self-interest. Biocentric holism, by contrast, situates human beings within a larger ecological totality and rejects any claim to human dominance, insisting that the diversity of species possesses value in and of itself, regardless of its benefit to humanity. Related philosophical perspectives such as deep ecology and posthumanism have further highlighted the limitations of anthropocentric paradigms, exposing their short-sightedness and profit-driven orientations that have contributed to today's ecological crises. Yet despite their insights, such debates often remain at the level of ideological contestation or social activism, manifesting in disputes over clean energy policies or climate reform,²³ without fundamentally altering humanity's relationship with the environment.

In this context, Venerable Master Hsing Yun and the FGS order propose a distinctive alternative that is neither strictly anthropocentric nor simply biocentric. While FGS's ecological practices do benefit humans, particularly Buddhist practitioners, by serving as vehicles for spiritual cultivation, the natural world is not instrumentalized merely as a means of enlightenment. Rather, the cultivation of compassion toward all sentient beings, including animals and plants, coupled with the Buddhist discipline of non-attachment to selfhood, aligns the FGS ethos in part with biocentric values. Yet the scope of Maser Hsing Yun's vision ultimately transcends biocentrism, for it does not confine itself to the preservation of life within *samsāra*. Its orientation is explicitly soteriological: to reconfigure humanity's relationship to the environment as a mode of Buddhist practice directed toward transcendence.

For this reason, the FGS approach may best be described as “Buddhocentric.” Environmental awareness and protection, in this framework, become integral to realizing the pure land on earth, not through external embellishments or artificial construction, but through the purification of the mind that perceives and engages with the natural world.

In Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s own words, “To speak gently and steadily is a practice of spiritual preservation as well as of protecting the natural environment. If we know how to preserve nature and actively protect the environment in daily life, then we are building a pure land in the present moment.”²⁴

Notes

- 1 Shu-Li Wang and Valentina Gamberi, “The Museum is Like a Temple: The Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum in Taiwan,” *Asian Anthropology* 22, no. 1 (2023): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2022.2117963>.
- 2 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Embracing Nature: Ecology from a Buddhist Perspective*, trans. Alex Wong (Buddhas Light Publications, 2016), 59.
- 3 T. 45, no. 1853, 40c10–18.
- 4 Lambert Schmithausen, *Plants in Early Buddhism and the Far Eastern Idea of the Buddha-Nature of Grasses and Trees* (Lumbini International Research Institute, 2009), 23–24.
- 5 Monica Gagliano, *Thus Spoke the Plant: A Remarkable Journey of Groundbreaking Scientific Discoveries and Personal Encounters with Plants* (North Atlantic Books, 2018).
- 6 T. 46, no. 1932, 782c20–21.
- 7 T. 75, no. 2397, 484c7–9.
- 8 Karen Meyers, “On the (In)sentience and Buddha-nature of Plants,” *The Insight Journal* 51 (2024): 39.
- 9 T. 45, no. 1835, 40c11–18.
- 10 John R. McRae, trans., *The Vimalakīrti Sutra* (Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2004): 78.
- 11 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Embracing Nature*, 84–85.
- 12 John R. McRae, trans., *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2000), 76.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 76–77.
- 14 John Becker, “Interreligious Solidarity for an Ecological Civilization: A Catholic and Humanistic Buddhist Conversation,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Buddhist-Christian Studies*, ed. Carol S. Anderson and Thomas Cattoi (Routledge, 2023), 279.
- 15 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Embracing Nature*, 83.
- 16 Norman Waddell and Masao Abe, trans., *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō* (State University of New York Press, 2010), 76–77.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 85.

- 18 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, “Meditative Concentration in Humanistic Buddhism,” *Three Trainings in Humanistic Buddhism* (Gandha Samudra Culture Company, 2007), 158.
- 19 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism Quotations* (Gandha Samudra Culture Company, 2013), 87.
- 20 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, “Meditative Concentration in Humanistic Buddhism,” 158–159.
- 21 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, “From People’s Basic Needs: Discussing Chan Life,” *Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s Lecture Series*, vol. 4 (Fo Guang Publication, 1987), 489.
- 22 Chih-Lin Liu and Wan-Yu Liu, “Sacred Heritage and Environmental Sustainability: Carbon and Biodiversity Insights from Taiwan’s Fo Guang Shan Monastery and Buddha Museum,” *NPJ Heritage Science* 13 (2025): article number 314, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s40494-025-01836-2>
- 23 Leah C Stokes, *Short Circuiting Policy: Interest Groups and the Battle Over Clean Energy and Climate Policy in the American States* (Oxford University Press, 2020).
- 24 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Buddha-Dharma Pure and Simple: A 21st Century Guide to Buddhist Teachings*, new ed., Vol. 3 (Dashu, Kaohsiung City: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise Co. Ltd., 2024) 203.