

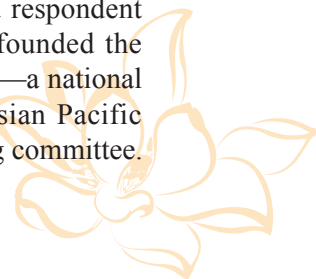
The Flowering of the Academic Study of Humanistic Buddhism in the West: The Institute for the Study of Humanistic Buddhism at University of the West



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Esteemed venerables, scholars, and students. I am honored and humbled to be here at the 6th Symposium of Humanistic Buddhism. Today, I speak briefly to introduce the Institute for the Study of Humanistic Buddhism at University of the West—which enjoyed its formal opening just two weeks ago—on October 18th, 2018. The Institute for the Study of Humanistic Buddhism (ISHB) joins its sister organizations—the Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism here in Kaohsiung, the Centre for the Study of Humanistic Buddhism at City University of Hong Kong (CUHK), and the Humanistic Buddhist Centre at Nan Tien Institute in Australia—to form a collaborative network of research institutions dedicated to the study of Buddhism and the development of resources for both scholars and the wider public. This morning I will first formally present the mission of our new Institute (ISHB) and how the Institute emerged, and then speak more informally about the particular context and challenges we faced on the other side of the pond.

The particular mission of our new Institute (or ISHB) is as follows:

Mission

The Institute for the Study of Humanistic Buddhist (ISHB) at University of the West is devoted to the multi- faceted study of Buddhism and its ongoing application within the human realm. Inspired by Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s vision of Humanistic Buddhism and its emphasis on education, ethics, art, and culture, the Institute will serve as the home for a wide-range of research projects and scholarly work that enhance our understanding of Buddhism historically and in the contemporary moment. The Institute aims to (1) encourage new directions in the academic study of Buddhism, (2) facilitate networks and

conversations between scholars, religious organizations, and practitioners, and (3) develop Buddhist resources that are applicable to everyday life.

The ISHB began out of an optimism and a need. Venerable Master Hsing Yun established University of the West (UWest) in the spirit of great openness; he was clear that we should identify our institution as a “Buddhist-founded university,” and not as a Buddhist college or seminary. This spirit of openness places an emphasis on the benefits of learning education and on human flourishing over on the views of one particular religion, sect, or order. In this way, Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s decision to identify us a “Buddhist-founded university” acknowledges the institution’s Humanistic Buddhist roots and its deep-rootedness in the Buddhist tradition in terms of its values and outlook. Yet, at the same time, was meant to symbolize a commitment to open intellectual enquiry and serve as an invitation to students from diverse backgrounds to come and study at UWest.

After UWest celebrated its 25th Anniversary a couple of years back and as we engaged in strategic planning for our university, it became clear that we had done well with one-half of the above equation (“openness”), but we struggled to recognize the root and what indeed made us unique and powerful. The root was strong and its life-giving force could be felt throughout the university—our students, faculty, administration, and staff. However, the root was submerged in a murky pond that obscured a clear articulation of that root and an overall picture of who we truly are.

We began optimistically envisioning the Institute for the Study of Humanistic Buddhism as a way to both self-reflect on who we are as an institution and better define for ourselves, our students, scholars, and the wider public Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s transformative sense of Buddhism—that is both expansive and specific. A need was also related to the needs of our students; our

PhD, DBMin, MDiv, and MA students come from an impressive diversity of religious backgrounds. And they are well-trained in canonical languages, early Buddhism, Chinese religious history and ethics, contemporary Buddhist applications, and interfaith outlooks. However, they knew very little about Humanistic Buddhism! The work of the ISHB is meant to focus our sense of self. And more broadly, it will forge a new appreciation of *renjian fojiao* 人間佛教, especially among scholars. It is a way to recognize, honor, and pay tribute to Venerable Master Hsing Yun and our roots.

Challenges and Context

The formal mission and vision we have for the ISHB was clear enough. However, in a large sense, it was quite “empty”—devoid of actual content. How would we get our faculty and students involve? How best to define ourselves in relation to our sister institutions? What type of research would we do? How would we engage both scholars and the wider public? In other words, what would we actually do? We see the academic Pure Land, but how do we realize it here on earth?

As you know, Humanistic Buddhism’s attention to the human world and Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s dharmic approach that one must “consider each human beings needs” places a radical emphasis on context. So we had to take a hard look and consider wisely our own context.

Our sister institutions, with which we look forward to collaborating, were doing wonderful work, e.g. the Fo Guang Dictionary of Buddhism, the Encyclopedia of Buddhist Arts, the collection and digitization of Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s oeuvre, multi-lingual translations of sutras and journals, the development and management of degree programs, and programming relevant for the general public. However, our Institute exists in a very different context—one where we could not assume a cultural foundation or underlying milieu of Buddhism; Buddhism is not

a dominant religion in the U.S. Also, we saw ourselves engaging most directly with the field of Buddhist Studies as it has developed and has been defined in the West, and specifically in the U.S.—its structure and particular set of conventions, expectations, and demands. So if you will please indulge me, while I lay out a bit of the history (below):

The Buddhism of scholars and the academic study of Buddhism constitute a special relationship with the Buddhism of everyday life in the West. Here, it is important to lay out the broader context, which paved the way for the development of Buddhist Studies as an academic field in American universities and gave rise to the flowering of Buddhism in the West.

Wars and conflict often drive knowledge production. The institutionalization of Buddhist Studies its own flowering as an academic field of inquiry began with the end of the Second World War and the advent of the Cold War in the U.S. Through their service in the Pacific Rim during World War II, American soldiers, translators, and other military personnel came in contact with Asian peoples—most specifically with the Japanese. Many of these men lived in Japan—a country steeped in Buddhist culture and belief—and returned with a curiosity, if not appreciation for a very foreign way of life. Some of these individuals would turn out to be respected Buddhist interpreters, e.g., Roshi Robert Aitken. Others would go on to study at American universities through the newly constituted GI Bill. At the same time, interest in the Buddhism and Asian culture was prompted by the opening of new relations and new markets in the East, as occupied Japan became an exporter of cheap goods to the U.S.

Departments in East Asian culture, alongside Slavic Studies programs, emerged as the United States entered the Cold War period in the 1950s and 60s. Fighting communism in Korea and Vietnam prompted the study of the battleground host culture. Foundations and scholarship funds, such as the Asia Foundation

(with links to the American Government's Central Intelligence Agency), still active today were founded during his period and supported research on Buddhism and East Asia. (In a recent conversation with Dr. Lewis Lancaster, I found out that he was funded by such a scholarship during his first year in PhD studies at the University of Wisconsin.) This is not to say that the work of scholars that emerged during this period engaged in their work with such instrumental or patronizing intent; rather, quite the opposite. However, we cannot ignore the fact that the scholarly study of Buddhism in the U.S. was underwritten by such interests.

All this would be for naught, if not for another major upheaval on the U.S. domestic front. Again, the American counterculture would mark a major shift in the worldview of the younger generation coming of age in the 1960s. The counterculture—anti-war, anti-authoritarian, and in search of new ways of life distinct from their parents—witnessed the “death of [the Christian] God” and a calling into question of religious authority. This shift was especially pronounced on college campuses, where students could now take courses in Buddhism and East Asian religions as they explored new religions and cultures and alternatives to their own religious upbringing. These students would read D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts, introduced to them by their college professors. While the Buddhism had begun to take root much earlier in American history, the first bud of American Buddhism would begin to emerge at this time.

Hence, Buddhism first took hold and was spread through the educated class in the U.S. In this way, the university and the programs in Buddhism Studies become potent avenues for Americans' understanding of Buddhism and the propagation of the Dharma. The emergence of a critical mass of American Buddhists was further supported by another change taking place during the 1960s—most notably the 1965 Hart-Cellars Act. This Immigration Act allowed an unprecedented number of immigrants from

Asia—many Buddhists—to settle in the U.S. and establish their own communities and temples. The long-range effect of this Act profoundly changed the religious landscape of the U.S.: many of the Buddhist temples that you see today across America were built during the last half a century, including Fo Guang Shan temples.

Universities and colleges still remain a significant avenue for Americans' entrée into Buddhism. A half a century after these developments and shifts, students still enter the classroom and experience their introduction to Buddhism. Or in some cases, re-introduction. I have encountered many Asian American students—children or grandchildren of Asian immigrants—some of whom have grown up in a Buddhist temple and others who have not, take classes because while they may have an intuitive sense of Buddhism, they feel they know very little about the philosophy and history of the religion. Some are trying to decide if they are Buddhist at all. Others feel a deep sense of cultural loss and nostalgia.

One has to understand that any Buddhist growing up in America has very little support beyond the temple walls and the boundaries of their ethnic community. The U.S., for all intents and purposes, is still a Christian nation or at least one that still invokes the language of Christianity in everyday social and political life. As particular countries can assume a Buddhist sensibility because Buddhism is the dominant religion, this is not the case in the U.S.

Whatever the case, the college classroom serves as the venue in which second- and subsequent generations of Buddhist Americans' understanding, if not their devotion and faith, is rekindled. The scholar or professor of Buddhism meets this need. Along with the changing environment, the study of Buddhism has developed into a full-fledged field with numerous programs, centers, and strong representation in the Association for Asian Studies and the American Academy of Religion and other academic associations. Programs in Buddhism have tended to focus on Japanese and Tibetan variants, because some of the historical

developments I have just outlined. Early Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism have received less attention by Western scholars—although that is changing.

The field of Buddhist Studies as it has developed in the West represents a unique and unfolding formation. At its inception, Buddhist Studies grappled with the overarching philosophy and history of the religion. As the field grew and developed, textual analysis of sutras and key commentaries and doctrines were undertaken. Historical studies also became more constrained and contextualized, as Buddhism (and religion write large) evolved into an object of study. This objective stance also prompted the study of contemporary Buddhism as a social and cultural phenomenon, best approached through the lens of sociology and anthropology and the methods of these larger disciplines, e.g., ethnography. The exploration and rendering of religious practice is seen as the purview of theological schools and seminaries (“faith seeking reason”), and not of secularized universities (reason alone).

In sum, the study of Buddhism in the U.S.—especially at a place such as University of the West—finds itself in a double-bind. There is the subjective need on the part of students and practitioners to cultivate Buddhist values and understanding (“wisdom”) on the one hand. On the other hand, are the conventions and expectations of objectivity demanded by the academic discipline of Buddhist Studies as it has developed in the West. To simply take the objective stance is to not understand the full picture and bracket and summarily dismiss the relevance of Buddhism for real living people. To pursue only the subjective dimension is to also not see the full picture and risk lack of serious recognition among the Western scholars, who ironically play a major role in the sustainability of Buddhism in the West.

It is important to recount the above history, because it is against this backdrop that we attempt to craft the new Institute for the Study of Humanistic Buddhism at University of the West.

There are three features that characterize our work:

1) A focus on Western scholarship and English-language research. This we see as a particular niche; much scholarship on Humanistic Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism has been conducted by Chinese scholars; but the field is very limited in the Western setting.

2) Rigorous training in scholarly methodologies and approaches for our graduate students. Such training offers an early introduction to Humanistic Buddhism for our students. However, they are “forced” to learn it, but rather compelled as a way to find intellectual community, engage in scholarly production and develop skills that are relevant to their own course of study.

3) The development of innovative approaches that employ the latest digital platforms.

In the West, we speak of IQ or an “intelligence quotient” that reflects a high level of understanding. However, in a changing world—one marked by the emergence of new applications that are able to handle “big data” and produce new ways of looking at the world through data visualization, we are compelled to develop our DQ, or “digital quotient,” as well. This attention to DQ, in attention to IQ, leads us to explore new methodologies and employ cutting-edge applications to provide resources that push the study of Buddhism in innovative directions.

These are the hallmarks of our new Institute. These features attempt to negotiate what we see as the double-bind (subjective↔objective, theology/philosophy↔-sociology) dictated by our particular context, while staying true to Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s thought and practice. Furthermore, the Institute is not simply responsive to the challenges I have outlined above, but proactive in its approach as we attempt to pursue an innovation direction in our research.

We have already been hard at work. The ISHB enjoyed its soft launch this summer as we formed our first project team of graduate

student researchers or fellows. Near completion, the Institute's research team will soon be ready to publish two bibliographies—the first of their kind—a primary source bibliography of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's works in English. And a secondary source bibliography of over 300 English-language scholarly references in the area of Humanistic Buddhism and modern Chinese Buddhism. The compilation of these bibliographies entailed combing through library databases, working with our own librarians (Ling-Ling Kuo and Judy Hsu), Buddha's Light Publishing and the Fo Guang Translation Center, and familiarizing ourselves with Zotero—a bibliographic management system. Through the endeavor, our graduate student researchers learned valuable skills. And the fruits of their labor—these bibliographic resources are the most comprehensive of their kind and represent an enormous contribution. The bibliographies will be available as PDFs and in RDF format, which can be incorporated into Zotero and other bibliographic management platforms.

The team is currently working on two projects—the Fo Guang Shan Mapping Project and the Humanistic Buddhism Knowledge Map. For the mapping project, we will construct a multi-use ArcGIS map of Fo Guang Shan temples, schools, and other organizations that also visualizes the institution's development. Sample layers will also be developed that, for instance, track the institution's development alongside the economic growth of Taiwan or the political history of China. The base map will be made available to scholars, who are encouraged to develop their own layers that are relevant in their own work.

The Humanistic Buddhism Knowledge Map will be a visual genealogy that charts the evolution of key figures and concepts related to Humanistic Buddhism. The aim of the project is not to arrive at a definitive definition of “Humanistic Buddhism,” but rather to digitally represent the history of significant figures and their articulation of relevant concepts that will shed new light the

organic development of modern Chinese Buddhism.

A future project that I am particularly excited about is the FGS Monastic Women's Oral History Project. Fo Guang Shan has a significant number of women monastics, many of whom hold leadership positions within the organization. Indeed, Venerable Master Hsing Yun recognized the potential of women, provided opportunities for their religious cultivation, and understood the potential of their contribution. This project aims to track the history of this vision and document the background and views of female monastics through the collection of oral histories and interview data. The database will serve as a resource for research for scholars interested in Buddhism and gender, the organizational development of FGS, and the development of Buddhism during the modern period.

In the Spring of 2019, the Institute will also co-sponsor the conference, “Expressions of the Dharma: Buddhist Art & Culture in Everyday Life.” We hope you will join us for this 3-day conference that will take place on April 4-6.

As the Institute grows, we will broaden out to host a wide-range of interdisciplinary research projects—so working together with our faculty in Chaplaincy, Business, Psychology, English, and the Liberal Arts. We will create forums for discussion and the dissemination of the latest scholarly work, and create a vital connection between scholars and everyday publics.

We live in the “human” pond and its murky waters in which lotus takes root. Each lotus bespeaks of the human potential of Buddhism. The roots that sustain are the food source—the ongoing sustainability and life-giving power. And its bloom represents the realization of this potential in all its beauty. As our mission is great, we pause to appreciate this wonderful opportunity to more fully realize Venerable Master Hsing Yun's vision of human excellence, reflection, and compassion, fitting into University of the West.



Consciousness can manifest all things, good and bad; when your mind is healthy you are at peace.

Lives are driven by karma; how you manage your life will make you a sage or a simpleton.

—Source: *The Everlasting Light: Dharma Thoughts of Master Hsing Yun*