

Localization Of Humanistic Buddhism In The West

Shi Huifeng, Ph.D

Department of Buddhist Studies, Fo Guang University

1.0 “What was the Patriarch’s intention in coming from the West?”

In Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s diary summary for the latter half of January 1990, a period where he spent his time at Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles, we read a record highlighting two important steps in the localization of Humanistic Buddhism in the West:

Starting from Hsi Lai Temple we are actualizing the first step of “The Dharma waters constantly flow throughout the five continents”, and the founding of the Buddha Light International Association will further enhance harmonious interaction and exchange between each nation worldwide. Finally, we are not letting down the Patriarch’s intention in coming from the West!
(Hsing Yun 1994)

Those two steps were the fact that Hsi Lai Temple, the Fo Guang Shan (FGS) monastic order’s flagship center in North America, was successfully progressing in its Dharma activities, and also the establishment of the Buddha Light International Association (BLIA), the lay organization paralleling the FGS monastic order, which aimed at a very real international reach. Venerable Master’s phrase about the flowing of the waters of Dharma throughout the entire world was itself framed by reference

to one of the great narratives of the founding of Chinese Buddhism, i.e. the arrival of the Patriarch Bodhidharma who brought Chán Buddhism to China, often considered the essence of the Buddha's own wordless awakening according to many Buddhists in East Asia. Putting all this together, Venerable Master's declaration implies that the transmission of Humanistic Buddhism to the United States was also in a sense the arrival of the core of the Dharma to the West, and that Hsi Lai—West Come (西來 xīlái)—was the sacred location for this critical moment of religious history.

1.1 Venerable Master Hsing Yun on Buddhist Localization

This relationship or resemblance between these two important phases in the history of Buddhism's dissemination has been explicitly stated elsewhere in Venerable Master Hsing Yun's explanations of what he calls "localization" (本土化 běntǔhuà). For example, in his BLIA Annual Convention Keynote speech nearly ten years later in 1998, entitled "The Human World and Lifestyle", he expressly mentioned this earlier historic precedent as a reason why "Localization of Temples" was not only justified, but indeed a requisite:

Just as when Buddhism first came to the East from India, the first Indian monks in China all just engaged in translation of the scriptures, whereas the building of monasteries was left in the hands of the Chinese monks. Due to this, nowadays we have Chinese Buddhism. If at that time the Indian monks like Kāśyapa Mātāṅga, Zhū Fǎlán, and others did not return to India but instead remained and immigrated to China to build monasteries and spread the Dharma, how would we have the special features of Chinese Buddhism of the present? (Hsing Yun 1998)

In the same keynote speech, Venerable Master states that in order to let the “Dharma waters flow” throughout the world, in the context of the present reality of the global village and international community,

[t]herefore, whether it is the BLIA or any other Buddhist group in the present or the future, we need to promote “localization”. This is because Buddhism is not to be used as a kind of tool for one nation to invade another nation. We need to live together in harmony, mutually develop, survive together, and support one another. So, wherever BLIA engages in Humanistic Buddhism among humanity, it needs to develop a kind of Buddhism that has the special features of the local culture. (Hsing Yun 1998)

By this point in the late 1990s, FGS had already established a number of regional branch headquarter temples in not only North America, but also in Europe, Australasia, South America and Africa, in add ition to the many branch centers established in East and South East Asia in the decades previous. While the topic of localization—mainly with reference to the West, but also globally—was mentioned in numerous talks and Venerable Master’s diary entries from the time,¹ specific details other than a general guideline for direction were still few. One discussion of the topic did provide four core points of localization: “One, localization of language. Two, localization of custom and culture. Three, localization of habits and way of life. Four, localization of education.” (Hsing Yun, 2009). Each of the four was illustrated with several examples, such as repeating the material on the

¹ For example, refer Hsing Yun (1994; 2004; 2006); and Hsing Yun in Queen and Williams (1999, xxi), and so forth.

history of the translation of Buddhism from Indic languages into Chinese cited previously, and that one would need to learn the local language of the host culture; or minor cultural differences such as eating rice versus noodles, or shaking hands in greeting as compared to embracing. Though, as Chandler interprets, while Venerable Master thus “means that centuries-old customs can be replaced by other customs more appropriate to the region in question”, “the difficulty in applying this method lies in determining just where core truth ends and custom begins” (Chandler 2004, 293).

In defense of the lack of specifics, we acknowledge that Venerable Master was talking in broad terms to a wide audience, and was himself based in Taiwan rather than at the frontline of Buddhist localization in FGS centers abroad. I believe it is recognizing this situation and the need for the input of local voices that he is later on record as claiming that:

When most speak of ‘localization’, they do so from their own perspective, but my ‘localization’ is different, it is from the perspective of that foreign country.
(Lin 2001)

That is, Venerable Master perhaps does not consider it to be his role proper to provide such details for localization, but this should be the task of the “locals” of the place in question. We can find justification for such an attitude in that this in turn conforms to one of Venerable Master’s four elements of Humanistic Buddhism, i.e. “needed [or wanted] by the people” (人要的 rén yàode).² But, which people? And what do they want? It is thus apparent from the bulk of Humanistic Buddhism sources on the topic—whether

² The four points being: “Taught by the Buddha, needed [or wanted] by the people, purifying, and wholesome” 佛說的 Fóshuōde, 人要的 rényàode, 淨化的 jìng huàde, 善美的 shànmeīde.

books, talks, speeches or so forth—that we are missing perhaps the most critical point of view in the entire narrative of Buddhist localization. If we may borrow from entrepreneurial guru Ernesto Sirolli when he shares his secret to success in his vast experience of providing economic, industrial and missionary aid on an international level: “I do something very, very, very difficult. I shut up, and listen to them.” (Sirolli 2012).³

Thus, it is essential that we now listen to those Western Buddhists who are the supposed target of FGS and Humanistic Buddhism’s localization efforts. For is it not a truism in Buddhist pedagogy that, “in accordance with the disposition [of the audience], one bestows the teachings”? (因材施教 yīncái shījiào). For the localization of Humanistic Buddhism in the West, we need to first listen, before we can then speak and act.

2.0 Demographics of Western Buddhists

Apart from Fo Guang material on Western Buddhism (Hsing Yun 2005), we are fortunate to have a number of valuable sources on the demographics of Buddhism and Buddhists in the West. One of the first challenges is the seemingly innocuous question of “Who is a (Western) Buddhist?”, which in cultures without long Buddhist histories is often fraught with problems of both definition and identity. Many earlier studies utilized a two-fold classification of “immigrant” or “ethnic” Buddhism contrasted with “convert” Buddhism, which was effectively coded language for “Asian” and “white Caucasian” Buddhism. The problems of the racial overtones notwithstanding, this quickly falls apart after the first generations of both ethnic Asian immigrants and also white Caucasian converts. E.g. is a third generation German

³ Sirolli in turn cites the Buddhist inspired economist Fritz Schumacher, “If people do not want to better themselves, they are best left alone.” (Schumacher 1973, 171).

Vietnamese Buddhist Asian or German? And a French speaking native Canadian who was born and raised Buddhist by her Baby Boomer parents is no convert. Such a division fails to account for the actual facts by falling into stereotypes. Likewise too for a related three-fold system of “import”, “export” and “baggage” Buddhism, which while a catchy metaphor also deprecates through the last of the three terms. (Nattier 1998, 188ff.) “Baggage” Buddhism so defined may in fact be the majority in the West, so how can we so quickly cast it aside or downplay its significance in our analysis? Therefore, while these categories are not ideal for a complete picture of Western Buddhism, for our own question of FGS Humanistic Buddhism during its first few decades in the West we will still at times find them useful heuristics, if not ultimately satisfactory.

2.1 A Portrait of the Western Buddhist

As far as Fo Guang Shan’s own localization policy, the organization’s internal data and understanding of the corpus of its own devotees—who are overwhelmingly first or second generation immigrants—is fairly clear and complete. Our emphasis here shall thus be on those Western Buddhists who have not historically come from Asian Buddhist cultures. The studies of Coleman, Hammond and Machacek paint a graphic picture of the “typical convert” to Buddhism in the United States, which we shall supplement below:

[A] 46-year-old white female from a mainstream religious background, with a masters degree and personal income of \$50,000. She spends between thirty and sixty minutes a day in meditation or chanting and holds liberal views of life and politics. At the same time, she is turned off by a good deal that passes for modern culture and is inclined to try new beliefs and practices. She is likely to be single or divorced, living away from

her parents and siblings, and ‘at a turning point in life’.
(Queen and Williams 1999, xiv-xv)

An informative portrait, though one that we may add much greater detail to by drawing on sources such as the Pew Research Center’s data on Buddhists in the United States (Center 2015). We are assuming here, as a working hypothesis of course, that European and Australasian Buddhist demography will be largely similar. Gender wise, while statistically our Western Buddhist is female, the 2015 data reveals a near perfect 50/50 male to female ratio. Other gender related issues we shall return to later.

While supposedly aged 46 years, we see that presently the middle aged group is actually least represented, and this figure is statistically most likely a mere median or mean, though not the mode. It thus lies between a large number of older counter-culture Baby Boomers, with fewer Generation X and Older Millennial Buddhists, and then an increasing number of Younger Millennials. Generational differences should definitely figure into considerations of localization efforts.

Politically and socially, our demographic is overwhelmingly trends moderate-liberal progressive left, i.e. largely Democrat in the USA, and equivalents elsewhere. This means they have strong support for contemporary social issues such as LGBT rights and equality, environmental issues, and a social welfare net for the underprivileged and needy.

To pick but one such issue covered in the PEW Center’s data, we may show the “views about same-sex marriage” of American Buddhists, plotted against the views of a range of other religious groups. The sheer numbers alone make for interesting reading. In many ways, unsurprisingly, the American Buddhist community looks a lot like the American Hindu community in many of these statistics. I would warrant a larger ratio of Buddhist converts, however, given the popularity of Buddhist in the West in the last

few decades.

Given their high educational qualifications—our 46 year old has a graduate degree—we should also not be surprised to learn that concerning “the ways they first became involved in Buddhist practice ... a majority reported that it was through reading a book. Hearing about Buddhism from friends was the only other commonly given response.” (Coleman 1999, 95.) Those who do not identify as “Buddhists” per se, but are “sympathizers” or “friends”, are an important group that is so easily overlooked when using self-identification as a basis for obtaining such statistical data, as our PEW study statistics presented here. Reflecting on our so-called typical Western Buddhist’s interest in both meditation and reading, we have an interesting group known as “night-stand” Buddhists. They “are those who might place a how-to book on Buddhist meditation on the night-stand ... and read it before they fall to sleep, and then rise the next morning to practice, however imperfectly or ambivalently, what they learned the night before.” (Tweed 2002, 21.) The actual numbers of such night-stand Buddhist sympathizers, or Western non-affiliated meditators in general, is very hard to ascertain, even though researchers feel confident that their numbers are quite high. They are also no doubt quite influential, in a subtle but pervasion fashion. For localization efforts by FGS, they cannot afford to be overlooked.

Meditation and study of fairly traditional forms, to be ratified through one’s personal experience, is the entrance point into the journey of Western Buddhist. We may surmise that the “turning point” in our portrait caricature’s life which partly prompted her to likely purchase a book on meditation as recommended by a friend in the first place, shows that she feels her present life circumstances have thrown challenges to her life that her own “mainstream religious background” and culture have been unable to effectively answer or respond to in a satisfying way. While quite possibly holding an idealized view of Buddhism due to some form

or another of overly romanticized self-help literature and information gleaned from friends in the know, her impressions begin through words in a book and her comfortable pillow in the privacy of her bedroom alone, rather than through hard contact with actual living and speaking Buddhist teachers and communities. (Bluck 2006, 190.)

3.0 Features of Western Buddhism

Who and what are these Western Buddhist teachers and their communities? Having described the demographics of Western Buddhists, we may now turn toward the particular features and qualities of Western Buddhism. This is obviously a very broad topic, as any religious tradition includes both the doctrinal aspects of the tenets and beliefs of the faith, in addition to the social and cultural aspects. Earlier we cited Venerable Master Hsing Yun and Chandler's interpretation of him as indicating that the core elements of localization would be the cultural and social, rather than the purely Buddhological. Hence, these are the areas that we shall largely focus upon here. In a study that we shall turn to below, Bluck also indicates that several core practices of Western Buddhism are quite traditional Buddhist, whereas cultural elements are more distinctively westernized. (Bluck 2006, 191-2.)

Much has been said about what has already occurred in the process of the mutual encounter between Asian Buddhist forms and Western culture, as well as in which directions this process shall likely continue in for the future. In our case of Chinese traditions in the West, we feel that the situation has historical precedents unlike those found in several other traditions. That is to say, when Indian Buddhism was brought to China, it met a civilization and culture that was not only historically ancient but also rich and prosperous. Unlike many cases in Southern and Central Asia where Indian Buddhist culture represented the highpoint of civilization in general, the Chinese did not necessarily look to Buddhism

for cultural advancement, but for the spiritual. For the last few centuries to the present, Western culture and civilization has also been globally hegemonic, and while many in the West now look to Buddhism for spiritual inspiration, there is but little interest in importing the traditional social cultures of Asia to remedy modern Western secular humanism. Indeed, many Western Buddhists wish to quickly jettison what they consider to be patriarchal and feudal Asian social forms from their adopted Buddhist traditions, i.e. remove the cultural but retain the spiritual.⁴ Coleman makes a comparison between East and West in this regard:

Western Buddhism ... in contrast to the traditional forms of Asian Buddhism, men and women practice together as equals in this new Buddhism. Teachers borrow freely from different Buddhist traditions that are almost completely isolated from each other in Asia. Ceremonies and rituals are simpler and more direct, and few people believe in their ability to produce magical effects. But most importantly, the new Buddhism makes the path of meditation and spiritual discipline available to everyone, not just to an elite groups of monks. (Coleman 1999, 92)

Here we see the Western critiques against perceived gender inequality, ritual based community systems, and the power of religious elites in traditional forms of Buddhism. In the process,

⁴ It has been acknowledged that those Westerners who participate in mainly Asian immigrant Buddhist centres often fall into one of two categories. Those who are there for the cultural experience, e.g. Sinophiles, and those who seek the Dharma. Often the former have little or no interest in Buddhist teachings or practice per se, and the latter are also sometimes too keen to remove supposed cultural accretions. The highly problematic notion of removing purely cultural content to reveal a purely spiritual core is an important topic of discussion, but far beyond our scope here.

these critiques belie the general trends in Western civilization since the European Enlightenment as a whole. First that of Protestantism and its doctrinal interpretation of sola scriptura and salvation through faith and works or social justice; and second through Humanism, with its tenets of democratic governance, gender and ethnic equality in political, religious and social participation. Queen, one of the pioneers of researching the emerging Western Buddhism as a field in its own right, has thus identified what he considers the three main features of Buddhism in the West while focusing on North America:

Democratization, a levelling of traditional spiritual and institutional hierarchies, entailing both laicization (the emphasis on lay practice and the de-emphasis of ordained and monastic vocations), and feminization (the rise of women in membership and leadership); Pragmatism, an emphasis on ritual practice or observance (particularly meditation, chanting, devotional and ethical activities) and its benefit to the practitioner, with a concomitant de-emphasis of beliefs, attitudes, or states of mind (agnosticism); and Engagement, the broadening of spiritual practice to benefit not only the self, but also family and community (domestication), and society and the world, including the social and environmental conditions that affect all people (politicization). (Queen and Williams 1999, xix)

Elsewhere, in a study of British Buddhism, Bluck has also given ten types of “family resemblance” by which to recognize all the various forms of Buddhism which have successfully transplanted themselves in the soil of the British Isles. The first three resemblances are all “traditional” in nature, namely: 1. Trade-

tional meditation practices; 2. traditional devotional services; 3. traditional teachings. The remaining six combine traditional but also Western adapted elements: 4. some emphasis on textual study; 5. ancient and contemporary narratives; 6. a program of retreats and courses; 7. a common ethical code for all members; 8. an important teacher-student relationship; 9. mostly Western teachers; and 10. increased lay participation. (Bluck 2006, 191-2.) From these ten aspects, we can see that while the doctrinal and practice elements are largely traditional forms, it is however the modes in which the members of these communities interact that make them distinct from Asian groups.

For our own analysis and description of Western Buddhism that follows, we shall utilize a modified version of Queen's three points, while bringing in Bluck's ten characteristics, such as adding our previously mentioned entry point of "night-stand Buddhist" meditation learnt through the reading of popularized modern Buddhist works, to make a total of four key features. The four categories by which we shall examine the character of Western Buddhism are thus: 1. focus on traditional meditation and study; 2. institutional hierarchies and structures; 3. democracy, egalitarianism and gender equality; and 4. social engagement and activities. This division is a general heuristic for explanatory purposes, as all four mutually interact and influence each other, and none can be extracted independently from the remaining three.

3.1 Focus on Traditional Meditation and Study

The portrait of our night-stand Buddhist—half awake yet half asleep sitting on their pillow at night and morning—is, of course, just the start. As Coleman's study shows, for Western Buddhists, "meditation practice is the heart of Buddhism for most of the respondents". Their regular meditation schedule means near daily time on the cushion, "for a mean of a little over 40 minutes" per session of otherwise traditional Asian meditational forms. Perhaps

weekly or monthly classes or retreats at their Buddhist center of choice, often in a rented hall or private home, means that most practice is performed at home, alone. The vast majority also attend intensive retreats lasting from a weekend to a week or more, at least once per year. (Coleman 1999, 97.) By this stage the majority are self-identifying as Buddhists, rather than Buddhist sympathizers (such as our “night-stand” species).

While the practices are largely directly brought from Asian traditions, their teachings—whether oral instruction or written books and manuals—are of course in Western languages. The meditative traditions from which they are sourced are three broad categories (Wallace 2002): 1. There has been an explosion of interest about “Zen” (禪)—originally a form of Japanese Buddhism introduced to the West over a century ago, but becoming popular in North America after the USA occupation of Japan after the second world war. On the other hand, “Zen” is now a chic brand to sell anything from “Organic Optimum Zen” cereal to the new Asus range of ZenBook computers and ZenFone cellular phones. 2. The Theravādin based Vipassanā “insight” traditions promoted first by people like Goenka, and later by Western students, has led to the ever growing “mindfulness” movement in the West. This has had an important influence over various forms of psychology and stress reduction techniques, though such secular contexts have more recently roused no shortage of criticism from more traditional Buddhist based Theravādin practitioners. 3. Tibetan tantric teachings, in particular the so-called high-end formless tantras of Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā, which were brought to the West by a range of remarkable lamas after the Tibetan diaspora. While other meditative forms—and we may include certain forms of chanting or recitation in this—are also found in Western Buddhism, these are the three main types that have set the standard perceptions of meditation for this new audience. We may note that despite the variation in source traditions, all three—sitting Zen, Vipassanā or

mindfulness and the higher tantras—are generally characterized as being without a fixed or rigid form, and all largely claim to be experientially verifiable irrespective of belief or faith. Thus, the rhetoric for Buddhist meditation is sometimes made in the West that portrays it as somehow above or beyond religion itself, or at least, is its very essence. In this way, while starting from traditional forms, by attempting to shear away supposedly cultural elements, the process of cultural appropriation may be enacted.

For many Western Buddhists, Buddhism means meditation. Any attempts at localization of Humanistic Buddhism to the West must take this message to heart, and provide paths from the entry level “night-stand” dilettante to the dedicated Western Buddhist yogi or yogini adept. We may see in the presentation echoes of the very definition of religious experience and psychology given by none other than William James, over century ago, when he stated that: “Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” (James 1985 [1902], 31.) That is, they claim that true spirituality is personal experience, and far beyond social constructs. This in turn further pushes the arguments for localization as a shearing away of foreign culture.

3.2 Institutional Hierarchies & Structures

This brings us to our second core feature of Western Buddhism—its attitude toward institutions, their hierarchies and structures. The portrait of our 46 year-old, we may recall, probably grew up in a mainstream Western religious culture, likely some form of Protestantism, though quite possibly Catholicism or Judaism. The very fact that she now no longer seeks for life’s answers from the religion of her birth, may already tell us something about her attitude toward institutionalized mainstream

religions. In the West, many Christian traditions are often among the most conservative social forces, yet she herself has a very open and liberal attitude. This may lead to some personal conflict in the social sphere against Church orthodox dogma. Take, for example, a comparison between evangelical attitudes toward gay rights versus typical Western Buddhist attitudes on same (Center 2015).

In short, our Western Buddhist is largely at odds with Western religious institutions and their conservative ways, and seeks in Buddhism a spiritual path freed from such social constraints. This situation is described by Seager, who states that:

We are in the midst of a massive demystification and democratization of contemplative practices. We are witnessing a period of time when resources ... allow people to explore their own spirituality ... These conditions have allowed contemplative practices to become untethered from religious traditions and monastic settings and have created fertile ground for their application in secular society. (Seager 2012, 212)

Just as Western society is becoming increasingly secular, there is the notion that religions in general, i.e. the religious institutions of Western civilization, are somehow intrinsically bound to feudal society and magical thought, whereas a modern humanist secular society is based on the principles of democracy, egalitarianism and gender equality, and scientific understanding.

3.3 Democracy, Egalitarianism & Gender Equality

This brings us to our third feature of Western Buddhism, which includes some core notions that constitute modern Western civilization. Now, as we have noted above, while these have existed as important ideas for some time in the West, it is worth noting

that the post-war events of the 1960s and 1970s, e.g. the feminist movement and civil rights movement (we shall return to the anti-war movement, below), were taking place at the very moment of the blooming of Buddhism in the West through increased contact with Asia.

The movement away from religious hierarchies and institutions was of course easy for Buddhism in the West, as there were no centuries long traditions of Buddhist religious power in Europe. Also, while Asian Buddhist orders—be they monastic or lay—could count members in their thousands, or even millions, the tiny Western Buddhist population meant very different organizational principles were in effect. Even to this day, the largest Buddhist organizations found in the West are still largely Asian based, e.g. Soka Gokkai, or BLIA. Western Buddhist was, is, and will largely remain for some time, a marginal social force. Due to popularity of certain leaders and a squeaky clean image—deserved or otherwise—it does morally punch above its weight, but it’s still a lightweight nonetheless.

The socially and politically liberal and progressive outlook of our demography has already started to become a notable feature of its attitude toward gender, and sexual identity and orientation. As Seager describes this: “Thus, to focus on the drive for gender equity is also to acknowledge the diversity of American Buddhism, in which women and men, straight and gay, monastics and laity are all part of a community where innovation and tradition mingle in complex and often unexpected ways.” (Seager 2012, 232.) Due to the fact that the Buddhist traditions are sourced from Asia, coupled with a common modern socialist-leftist interpretation of the Buddha as a social reformer in the face of Brahmanic religious hegemony, and class equality and rights for disempowered ethnic minorities, this has also become a key rallying call for the Western Buddhist social conscious.

3.4 Social Engagement & Activism

Having taken on the view of democratic organization, gender, sexual and ethnic equality, these then become important subjects of our fourth feature of Western Buddhism, i.e. social engagement and activism. While in Asia modern Buddhist traditions are continuing to participate in social activities outside the monastery gates, there is a distinctive position being enacted in the West. As Seager describes it, “The phrase ‘socially engaged Buddhism’, however, is usually used to refer to the application of the Dharma to social issues in a more comprehensive fashion than religious charity or philanthropy, one that seeks to redirect the personal quest for transcendence to the collective transformation of society.” (Seager 2012, 233.) (Perhaps this is a gradual working toward a form of Buddhist “liberation theology”.) This difference is largely due to the forces found in modern Western culture, of which three are most influential: 1. “an expression of liberal-left social concerns inherited from the 1960s”; 2. Buddhist social movements from Asia; and 3. “a reform-minded tradition in American religious history, particularly powerful in Protestantism” (Seager 2012, 234-5; 61-62).

The concrete forms that Western Buddhist social engagement and activism take include the aforementioned, i.e. efforts in the areas of democratic organization and governance, gender and ethnic equality, and freedom in sexual orientation and expression. There are also those causes which border between religious charity and socialist political ideals, such as working with the homeless. Another area of activism where Buddhism has made its mark in the West may be partly due to historical circumstance. American involvement in the Vietnam War was at a point not long after World War II when Zen had been already imported into North America and when also Tibetan Buddhist refugees were popularizing their traditions in the West. The peacenik and hippy counter culture links in this period are obvious, and this also accounts for the fact that

our Western Buddhist demographic has a large population from the Baby Boomer counter-culture generation (see above).

More recently the global climate crisis has also been a focal point of Buddhist activism in the West. Underlying this external engagement has been an interpretation of Buddhist causality, i.e. dependent origination, expressed in modern systems theory where all elements effect and influence all other elements in complex feedback systems. To this the popularity of several Mahāyāna traditions in the West and their emphasis on “great compassion for all sentient beings”, i.e. not merely human beings alone, must also be added. The net effect is a strong and still growing Buddhist deep ecology movement. The Beat poet, author, woodsman and Zen practitioner Gary Snyder, if not the first Western Buddhist ecologist, has at least become its most recognizable figurehead. His now many decades of work have produced “a unique brand of Buddhist environmentalism, somewhere between ‘eco-spirituality and eco-justice’ ... all articulated in a Mahāyāna idiom that maintains ‘the strictness and rightness of its own training method’ and ‘operates primarily at the level of actual practice and secondarily at the level of theory.’ ... the final impression is of a genius who has done more for American Buddhism and belles lettres—if not for Buddhism and ecology—than any other figure.” (Queen and Williams 1999, xxviii.) A much more recent example of this engaged Buddhist thought can also be seen in the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh:

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I vow to cultivate lovingkindness and learn ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I vow to practice generosity by sharing my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others,

but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth. (Thich Nhat Hanh, quoted in Seager 2012, 236)

From its simple yet powerful expression we can see how the broad notions of loving-kindness and compassion together with an all embracing ecology and the fundamentals of Buddhist ethics are combined into a single statement which exemplifies Western Buddhist social engagement and activism as a form of social justice.

4.0 “What was the Venerable Master’s intention in coming from the East?”

Above we have outlined and discussed both the general demographics of Western Buddhists and also the particular features of Western Buddhism. The coverage has necessarily been brief, but we hope it sufficient to clarify the scene. We did so because while Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s generic guidelines for the localization of Humanistic Buddhism are oft repeated in FGS literature, we felt that his call to define and actualize localization “from the perspective of that foreign country” necessitated hearing from the other side, or rather, the “local” side. This is required if we are to avoid, as the Chinese idiom states, a localization policy of “making a carriage behind closed doors, then going out to fit it on the tracks” (閉門造車, 出門合轍 *bimén zaòjū, chūmén héchè*), i.e. a localization of Humanistic Buddhism for the West without Western consultation and input. While Venerable Master’s guidelines were for localization anywhere, hence the broad bare bones approach, we have focused on Humanistic Buddhism coming from the East to the West. Putting the goals and perspectives of both sides together—the views of Fo Guang Shan and the inclinations of nascent Western Buddhism—we may conclude with some more fleshed out guidelines and pointers for the localization of Human-

istic Buddhism in the Western cultural sphere. It is high time to provide such details, for while Venerable Master “wishes that within ten years, these monasteries can ‘localize’” (Lin 2001), and that he asked “all BLIA members to make a common vow, aiming to implement adaptation of all these establishments to the local culture and circumstances in the next twenty to thirty years time” (Hsing Yun 2004), these statements were made some ten to fifteen years ago. It appears that there is still obviously quite some way to go!

Perhaps the first point is that we need to hear more voices from those for whom we are supposedly localizing. That is, to hear what is “needed by the people” (人要的 rén yàode), one of four core elements of Venerable Master’s definition of Humanistic Buddhism itself. While anecdotal material may be useful and better than nothing at all, in order to make these voices as objective and representative as possible, we may need to consult some local Buddhist experts. For this reason recent Fo Guang Shan localization efforts need to focus on establishing a number of local regional “Localization Committees” comprised not just of the immigrant community but also with at least 50% locally born and raised members. Ideally, not just local Buddhists, but experts, as per Malcolm Eckel’s proposal some years ago “that scholars of Buddhism (practitioners or not) volunteer their time and expertise” or are requested by the branch temples to act as “consultants” to temples. (Queen and Williams 1999, xxxiii.)

Just as localization from Asian forms of Buddhism to Western forms is not to force Asian culture upon the latter, the latter is not there to push out the former, either. Many so-called ethnic Buddhist centers constituted of recent immigrants have important roles as culture centers, “a way of conserving their history, of conserving their traditions, their rituals, what they want to pass on to their children” (Seager 2012, 267). It is well known that providing such cultural and social links to immigrants’ home cultures actually aids

in their process of assimilation, i.e. localization.

But, “for the Euro-American, the impulse to convert was very, very different” (Seager 2012, 267), and we have seen the rejection of normative cultural and social institutions and structures in our demographic review of Western Buddhism. Some time ago Paul Numrich “introduced the notion of ‘parallel congregations’ in his study of Asian American and Euro-American groups that share temple facilities” in the USA. (Queen and Williams 1999, xxvii.) This idea has been briefly floated in Fo Guang Shan temples, but it is seldom attempted, let alone successfully carried out to an ideal result. It may be one way of bringing both groups close together, albeit at a distance, until time gradually merges them into a fully traditional yet localized community. Whatever the method, as Chandler states: “For FGS to be able to claim itself as an international operation transcending all ethnic and cultural boundaries, it must extend itself beyond its core Chinese base.” (Chandler 2004, 300.)

In the context of such a community which is thus intelligently informed, we may then work on those elements that will bring local people into the fold. In particular, we have the portrait of the “night-stand” Buddhist sympathizer learning meditation through popular self-help books, and so know that more of this sort of literature, tailored to the audience, is required from FGS. Meditation classes for beginners, but ranging up to shorter and longer retreats, as well as study classes aiming at a fairly educated and intellectual audience, all based on traditional sources, will also be staples for the Western Buddhist community. It goes without saying that all of these will need to be conducted in English, Spanish, or whatever other local languages are commonly used.

Practice aside, the organization will need to be reconstructed and operate on open and democratic principles, avoiding as much as practical overly rigid hierarchies of monastic vs. lay, male vs. female, or the like. It will have to support an open and proactive

attitude toward minorities and otherwise historically disadvantaged groups and sections of the community, as more and more of these people turn away from perceived prejudices of traditionally Western religious forms and look toward Buddhism for their spiritual needs in an open and loving way. They anxiously ask as they pick up the courage to walk in the monastery gates: will we be met with a loving embrace?

Finally, in terms of its roles in the community, the entire range of modern social challenges will then be the subject of its engagement and activities. Ideals that have already been strived toward for decades, such as gender and racial equality must still continue to be championed, as long as bigotry and discrimination remain. But, the more recent crisis of impending environmental collapse through anthropogenetic climate change may provide a challenge which effects all, human and non-human alike, and is so able to catalyze the synergetic communitas required for an authentic but distinct form of Western Buddhism to stand up tall and make its voice heard. Twenty-first century green Buddhist leadership is urgently required—is FGS ready to take up the banner?

Just as the Chán Patriarch Bodhidharma’s “intention in coming from the West” was said to bring realization of Buddha Mind to the people of China, so too the construction of a Humanistic Pure Land on earth is Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s “intention in coming from the East” to the West. This is entirely in line with the direction of Western Humanistic Buddhist growth. We know the facts and have the tools to actualize this, it now remains for us to put it into practice.



*Where the Buddha's teaching shines,
there is the pureland of Buddha's light.*

*Where the Dharma water flows,
there is the pureland of Dharma nature.*

*Where the Sangha's blessing is,
there is the pureland of fortune and virtue.*

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