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## **Buddhism and Psychology**

Psychology is the science of the mind, which includes investigation into the mental activities of human life. In the West, it originated from medical science, philosophy, natural science, religion, education, and sociology, and extends into a myriad of other disciplines and practices. In today's society, psychology is applied to education, industry, business, health care, national defense, law, politics, sociology, science, arts, and even sports. Its importance has increased with time.

Psychology examines the mental functions of the mind and the modes of human behavior. Psychologists in the West use it to study the development of

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personality and the determinants of behavior. Because of its inherent limitations, Western psychology has been only partially successful in personality transformation and improvement. Buddhism, on the other hand, understands very deeply the psychological nature of human beings and has developed effective treatment methods. As revealed in the *Flower Ornament Sutra* [*Avatamsaka Sutra*], “Our perception of the Three Realms arise from the mind, so do the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination; A birth and death emanate from the mind, they are extinguished when the mind is put to rest.”

The analysis of the mind in Buddhism is both multifaceted and sophisticated. As a spiritual practice, Buddhism contains numerous descriptions of the nature and function of the mind and instructions on how to search for, abide with, and refine it. In this regard, Buddhist Psychology has much to offer as does Western psychology.

### **I. How Buddhism Views the Mind**

In the beginning, “psychology” referred almost exclusively to “a science which explains the psyche.” Later, it was expanded to “a behavioral science for

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studying human problems.” This development is consistent with how life and the universe are viewed in Buddhism: “from the mind all phenomena arise.” Buddhism interprets everything in the world as the manifestation of our mind. It investigates and analyzes human problems at the most fundamental level. From this perspective, Buddhism can be considered a fully developed system of psychology.

All the Buddha’s teachings deal with the mind, as shown in the multitude of sutras and sastras. Among them, the psychological understanding taught by the Mind-Only (Yogacara) School is the closest counterpart to today’s psychology. The Yogacara texts are used to explain Buddhist Psychology.

The Yogacara views that the mind consists of eight consciousnesses, which clearly indicates that it is not made of a single element, but instead a complex interaction of factors. These factors are the functions of the six sensory organs of the human body (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mental function), plus the consciousness which constantly grasps the “self” (the Manas) and the Alaya consciousness (the store-consciousness, referred to as the “master of the mind” in Buddhist texts), which collects and stores all

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karmic seeds of the mind in the on-going cycle of birth and death of all sentient beings. To a Buddhist, the “self” at this moment reflects everything accumulated from the past. The “self” in the future depends on the actions of the present. That is, “what one receives in this life is what one cultivated in previous lives; what one receives in a future life is what one creates in this life.”

“The Three Realms are a mere manifestation of the mind, so are the myriad of dharmas.” All phenomena in this life and in the universe are nothing but mirror images imprinted on our minds through the eight consciousnesses. The eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind discriminate and grasp sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and thought. In accordance with each individual’s capacity for discernment, these images are further processed and recognized as real or unreal, and then used to construct what one believes to be “this life and the world.” In reality, all things constantly change in a cycle of formation, abiding, destruction, and emptiness. Our thoughts and ideas also arise, abide, change, and disappear instantaneously in the cycle of birth and death. Where can one find a life or a world that truly exists without

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change? Everything in the universe can only be found in perceptions and interpretations!

The Alaya consciousness is like a large storehouse, full of past memories of love, hatred, goodwill, and animosity, which we may no longer recall in this life. It perpetually influences our actions and behaviors in the present and is referred to as *ignorance* in Buddhism. Because of the karmic influence of this ignorance, we go through the cycle of birth and death. When the unwholesome seeds from the past mature, we become afflicted and are tempted to commit unwholesome deeds, which in turn plant new unwholesome seeds for the future. When the wholesome seeds from the past mature, our hearts are pure and noble, our minds are clear and intelligent, and we perform wholesome deeds that become new wholesome seeds again in the Alaya consciousness. In the teachings of the Mind-Only School, it is said that, "Seeds give rise to actions, then actions turn into new seeds." The psychological motives of all human behaviors are explained through this model.

Due to the influence of ignorance we carry with us from the past, we are prone to making judgments that result in negative feelings. Reinforced by greed

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and anger, our minds become confused and form incorrect views about things in the world. However, just as plants require sunshine and rain to blossom and bear fruit, similar conditions are required for the development of human behavior. Although feelings of love, hatred, and positive or negative intentions lie deep in the subconscious of all humans, when these feelings are provoked by the people or things that surround us, we must rely on our true mind and wisdom to avoid committing negative deeds and to conduct ourselves virtuously instead.

The development of our true mind and its wisdom relies on the diligent practice of upholding the precepts, developing concentration, and increasing awareness and insight. This process transforms a deluded mind into the true mind and is described in Buddhism as “converting consciousness into wisdom.” Consciousness carries the psychological baggage of past experiences. The wisdom emitted from the true mind is the therapy or treatment that humans can use to resolve internal conflicts within their minds, to transcend suffering in this lifetime, and to break from the cycle of birth and death in coming lives.

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The Mind-Only School further classifies the psychological responses of human beings into fifty-one categories and refers to them as “the attributes of the mind.” These include:

1. Five basic psychological functions: mental and physical contact, attention, feeling, identification, and analysis.
2. Five deliberately created mental conditions: aspiration, comprehension, memory, concentration, and wisdom.
3. Eleven wholesome psychological states: trust, diligence, humility, remorse, no greed, no hatred, no ignorance, tranquility, attentiveness, equanimity, and harmlessness.
4. Six root afflictions: greed, hatred, ignorance, arrogance, doubt, and incorrect views.
5. Twenty unwholesome psychological states: anger, hostility, irritation, conceit, deceit, flattery, arrogance, malice, jealousy, stinginess, remorselessness, no regret, no trust, laziness, insensitivity, apathy, agitation, forgetfulness, incorrect perception, and

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heedlessness.

6. Four neutral states of mind: remorse, sleepiness, applied thought, and sustained thought.

The Buddhist categorization of human psychological responses listed above is rather comprehensive and sophisticated. Today's psychology researchers have much to gain if they study Buddhism in addition to psychology.

## **II. The Allegories of the Mind**

In Buddhism, the root cause of human suffering and other problems is identified as the mind. It thus proposes to tap into this invaluable resource by transforming any unwholesomeness into wholesomeness. Buddhism instructs sentient beings on how to recognize the mind, calm the mind, and handle the mind. The Buddha taught for forty-nine years during his lifetime. Whether his teachings were about the Four Noble Truths, the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, the Six Paramitas, or the Four Means of Embracing, they invariably involved the mind. The mind dictates a person's behavior. If a person's mind

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is pure, all of his or her thoughts, speech, and actions will also be pure. If a person's mind is impure, then what he or she hears and sees will be impure. Therefore, it is said in one sutra, "When the mind is impure, the being is impure; when the mind is pure, the being is pure."

All the pain and suffering in this world are created by the mind. Our minds have wandered among the Six Realms in numberless lives. It seems that we are never in control. The mind always attaches to colorful external surroundings, tirelessly seeking fame, fortune, power, and love, and constantly calculating and discriminating. The truth is, our minds were originally capable of embracing everything just like the Buddha's mind. The mind was like the sun and moon, capable of breaking through darkness. It was like fertile soil, capable of enriching the roots of virtue and growing trees of merit. It was like a bright mirror, capable of reflecting everything clearly and truthfully. It was like an ocean, full of immeasurable resources and treasure. In the Buddhist canons, the Buddha often used simple stories to describe the mind. Ten of these stories are summarized below:

1. The mind is like a monkey, difficult to

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control. As is said in an old proverb, “the mind resembles a monkey and thoughts resemble horses.” The mind is compared to a monkey that is hyperactive, jumping and swinging between tree limbs without a moment of rest.

2. The mind is as quick as lightning and thunder. It is compared to lightning, thunder, or a spark created by striking a stone. It functions so rapidly that at the moment of thought, it has traveled throughout the universe without obstruction. For instance, when one thinks about taking a trip to Europe or America, immediately the scenery of Europe and America will surface in his or her mind, as if he or she were already present in those places.
3. The mind is like a wild deer, chasing after sensory pleasure all the time. The wild deer runs in the wilderness and becomes thirsty. To search for water, it scrambles in four directions, looking for a stream. The mind is like this wild deer. It can hardly resist the temptation of the five sensual desires and

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the six sensory objects. It chases after sight, sound, and other sensory pleasures all the time.

4. The mind is like a robber stealing our virtues and merits. Our body is like a village, with the five sensory organs as the five entrances, and the mind is the thief in the village who steals beneficial deeds and merits that we have laboriously accumulated, leaving a negative impression in other's minds and a poor lifestyle. Confucian scholar Wang Yangming once said, "It's much easier to catch bandits hidden in the wilderness than to eradicate a thief in our mind." If we can tame the thief in our mind, making it obedient and compliant, we will become the master of our minds and capable of fostering superior virtues and merits.
5. The mind is like an enemy that inflicts suffering upon us. The mind acts like our foes and enemies, creating trouble and causing us all kinds of pain and suffering. One sutra says, "Unwholesomeness in it-

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self is empty because it is a creation of the mind; if the mind is purified, unwholesomeness will disappear quickly.” The mind has Buddha Nature as its original quality, which is pure, free, and contented. But numerous delusions cause afflictions to the body and spirit. If we can eliminate delusions and false views, we will be able to make friends with this enemy.

6. The mind is like a servant to various irritations. It acts as if it is the servant of external objects, catering to and driven constantly by these objects, resulting in numerous afflictions. In another sutra, it says that the mind has three poisons, five hindrances, ten defilements, eighty-eight impediments, and eighty-four thousand aggravations. These hindrances, obstacles, defilements, and impediments are all capable of impeding our wisdom, restraining the mind and spirit, and making us restless. To transform the mind from a servant into a master depends largely on how we train it.
7. The mind is like a master who has the

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highest authority. It is the boss of the body. It possesses the highest authority. It leads, governs, and commands everything, including the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mental activities, to produce sensory feelings and cognitive functions.

8. The mind is like an ever-flowing spring. It is similar to running water that gushes continuously. It holds unlimited potential and contains immeasurable treasures. If we can effectively utilize our spring of wisdom, we will be free from the fear of scarcity.
9. The mind is like an artist who paints. The Flower Ornament Sutra says, "The mind is like a master painter experienced at painting all sorts of things." The mind can draw different kinds of pictures. When one's mind is inspired by wise ones and sages, one's appearance will seem wise and enlightened. When one's mind is occupied by malice and hostility, one's appearance will look fierce and repulsive like that of a devil or ghost. In other words, "As one's mind changes, so does one's appearance."

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10. The mind is like space and is without limits. The nature of the mind is as expansive as limitless space. It is capable of encompassing everything in the universe. A sutra states, "If one wants to comprehend the enlightened state of a Buddha, one has to purify his or her mind so it becomes empty like space." Space is vast and enormous, without borders or limits. Space supports everything but grasps nothing. If we want to understand the enlightened states of the Buddhas, we have to expand the mind so that it becomes limitless and boundless like the sky, friction-free and carefree like space. Then our minds will be able to embrace all things in the universe and benefit all sentient beings.

### **III. Ways to Purify the Mind**

Modern medicine is very advanced, and all kinds of pharmaceuticals are widely available. The great variety of drugs corresponds to the numerous ailments modern people now experience, many of which were non-existent before. However, while it is

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true that there are illnesses and cancers in our physical bodies, aren't there cancers in our minds as well? Greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, and doubt are illnesses that we cannot ignore. When we have physical disorders, we treat them with medicine, injections, or nutritional supplements. There is an old Chinese saying, "Medicine can only cure symptoms of ailments. It will not heal the real illnesses."

The real illness is the illness of the mind. As a matter of fact, many physical diseases are caused by psychological factors. The most obvious examples are illnesses of the stomach and digestive system. Eighty percent of these disorders are related to emotional distress. If we can maintain a balanced and peaceful mind, many diseases will disappear.

If we have a psychological disorder, what medicine will benefit our spirit? The Buddha is said to have created eighty-four thousand instructions to remedy our eighty-four thousand tenacious maladies. For example, if we do not eradicate greed by upholding the precepts, our minds will act like greed and run wild. If we do not overcome anger by practicing meditation, our spirit will live forever in a "flame of fire," which makes true tranquility difficult

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to reach. Finally, the affliction of ignorance can only be cured by wisdom, because wisdom is capable of penetrating the darkness of ignorance, uncovering the magnificent and tranquil state of the original mind.

In addition to the major illnesses caused by the three poisons, there are all kinds of psychological sicknesses that need to be healed, transformed, or overcome. The following are treatments prescribed in the Buddha's teachings:

1. A calm mind is the antidote to a busy mind. The tempo of modern life is rather fast and compacted. Most people suffer from distress caused by anxiety and insecurity. Therefore, in our daily lives, it is beneficial if we take a few minutes to practice the art of self-healing through mind calming and purification. When the "impurities" in our minds are cleansed, insight and wisdom will emerge from calmness.
2. A benevolent mind is the antidote to a malevolent mind. The mind sometimes is like that of a "sage," but at other times like that of a "troubled one," rambling here and there between the positive and the negative.

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When the benevolent mind arises, everything goes well; when the malevolent mind arises, millions of defilements result. Therefore, we must eradicate the unwholesome mind and guard and keep our correct thoughts in order to cultivate a mind of loving-kindness and compassion.

3. A trusting mind is the antidote to a doubtful mind. Many mistakes and tragedies in the world are due to doubt and suspicion, for instance, suspecting the betrayal of a friend, infidelity of a spouse, or ill will of a relative. When doubt arises, it is like a rope restraining the body, making movement almost impossible. The Treatise on the Perfection of Great Wisdom [Mahaprajnaparamita Sastra] says, “The Buddha’s teachings are as large as an ocean. Trust provides the only means to reach it.” Building trust not only allows us to realize the truth in the Buddha’s teachings, it also enables us to be more tolerant toward others, to accept the world as it is, and to strengthen our belief in the Dharma.

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4. A true mind is the antidote to a deluded mind. Because of attachments to the notion of self, personal preference, and judgment, ordinary people's minds are constantly discriminating and deliberating, creating countless illusions and unwarranted responses. To lead a life of truth, beauty, and virtue, we must use our minds without discrimination or duality, perceiving things as they are and treating all sentient beings as inherently equal.
  5. An open mind is the antidote to a narrow mind. We need to make our minds like an ocean, capable of receiving all the water from hundreds of rivers and tributaries without changing their characteristics. Only an all-embracing mind of gratitude and forbearance can relieve us from a jealous and intolerant mind.
  6. A balanced mind is the antidote to a fragmented mind. If material wealth is the only thing we value in life, we will feel anguished if we lose our fortune. If ordinary love is the focal point of life, we will suffer

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tremendously if that love relationship can no longer be maintained. Whenever there is grasping and clinging, there is differentiation and bondage. How can one be free? It is better that one reacts to the transient, worldly possessions, and the attached illusions with an even and equanimous mind. In doing so, one will become free and unperturbed at all times and during all occasions without any attachment or restriction.

7. An enduring mind is the antidote to an impermanent mind. Although Buddhism maintains that all things and phenomena, including thoughts and feelings, are impermanent and constantly changing, it also holds that when we vow to serve others and not just ourselves, the power of the vow and devotion is so immeasurable that it reaches beyond the universe. The Flower Ornament Sutra says, "As soon as one invokes the bodhicitta (the vow to attain Buddhahood), one is immediately enlightened." A bodhisattva who has just pledged his or her vow has a mind as pure

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as that of the Buddha's. However, he or she must maintain that momentum, without falling back, in order to attain perfect enlightenment.

8. A unattached mind is the antidote to an impulsive mind. Modern men and women fancy novelty and fads. They are curious about any new gimmick and thus become easy targets of bizarre and eccentric scams and frauds perpetrated by con artists. Chan Buddhism states that, "A unattached mind is the path to enlightenment." Maintaining a unattached mind in daily life will enable us to appreciate that, "Every day is a delightful day; every moment is an enjoyable moment."

In addition to these eight observations, we should cultivate a mind of patience, humility, thoughtfulness, filial piety, sincerity, honesty, innocence, purity, loving-kindness, forgiveness, joyfulness, charity, reverence, equanimity, forbearance, contrition, repentance, thankfulness, wisdom (prajna), compassion (a trait of a bodhisattva), and enlightenment (a

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trait of a Buddha) in order to fully develop its boundless potential.

#### **IV. Buddhism's Contribution to Modern Psychology**

Western psychiatrist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939 C.E.) developed the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. He was perhaps the first researcher who explored the role of the human unconscious in the history of Western psychology. His contribution to psychology may be analogous to Newton or Copernicus's contribution to science. Meanwhile, the human unconscious has been the subject of detailed and sophisticated analysis and discussion by Buddhists in the East for over fourteen hundred years, as evidenced by the book *Verses on the Formulation of the Eight Consciousnesses* (by Venerable Master Xuanzang).

Freud's work on the unconscious was further developed by his well-known student, Karl Jung (1875-1961 C.E.). Jung was very knowledgeable about Eastern philosophies and spiritual practices, such as Buddhism, Chan, and yoga. Inspired by these teachings, Jung divided the human psyche into three

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levels: conscious, individual unconscious, and collective unconscious. The individual unconscious functions like a storage of memory, amassing a person's repressed psychological experiences and feelings. The collective unconscious, on the other hand, is the accumulation of the deep-seated archetypes inherited by human beings over many generations. This idea is very similar to the formulation of the "Alaya Consciousness" in Buddhism and is an example of the influences of Buddhism on Western psychology.

After World War II, Humanistic Psychology developed. Advanced by Abraham Maslow (1908-1970 C.E.), it postulates that human needs can be divided into five stages. The highest stage is "self-actualization." He borrowed concepts such as "correct feeling" and "enlightenment" from Buddhism to interpret the ideal state of self-actualization. He identified this state as a living experience of spirituality and bliss, transcending time and space, object and subject. Maslow often used the Buddhist term "Nirvana" to describe this special experience. He also stated that the notions of "selflessness" and "true self (Buddha Nature)" could assist people in

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attaining self-actualization and contributing to others in society.

Another psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm (1900-1980 C.E.), had a keen interest in and deep understanding of Chan Buddhism. He spoke highly of Buddhism and its spiritual aspect characterized by “loving-kindness and compassion” and “an extreme altruism of elevating all sentient beings to bliss.” He thought that altruism, in the form of sacrificing one’s self for others, is the correct medicine for healing sickness in Western society.

As a branch of Humanistic Psychology, Transpersonal Psychology developed in the 1960s and has broadened the boundary of traditional psychology by integrating Buddhist philosophy and other spiritual practices with Western psychology. It is often thought to be the psychology of modern wisdom and creativity. This school of psychology investigates transpersonal psychic states, values and ideals, the meaning of life, caring for the dying, the relationship between the individual and the whole of humankind, and the relationship between the individual and nature. Meditation is included as a way of expanding one’s consciousness in order to establish an integration of

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mind, body, and spirit. Modern scientific methods are used to explain many of today's concrete psychological problems, whereas traditional Buddhist Psychology has often been more generalized. The scope and objectives of transpersonal psychology are very close to the concept of "oneness and coexistence" in Buddhism.

Dr. Viktor Frankl (1905-1997 C.E.), another advocate of Humanistic Psychology, devoted his research to the meaning of life and what happens at the time of death. He believed that human beings can create meaningful and enjoyable lives through their own efforts by probing deeply into and understanding life's essence. Further, he said that when humans are confronted with death or suffering, if they can adjust their state of mind from the negative to the positive in reacting to these circumstances, they will experience a deeper meaning of life, one which brings about clarity and dignity. He developed these ideas into a system called Logotherapy.

Logotherapy can be said to be an extension of the Buddhist idea that "every perception and concept is created by the mind." The *Virmalakirti Sutra* [*Virmalakirtinirdesa Sutra*] says, "If one's mind is pure,

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the world is experienced as pure.” Buddhism stresses daily practice and training in order to transcend life and death. The scholars of Humanistic Psychology also turned their attention to the relationship between the understanding of life and death and personal spiritual liberation. In the future, it is predicted that more integration will occur between Western psychotherapy and Eastern Buddhist practices leading to liberation from suffering.

Although we live in a time of abundant resources brought about by rapid economic growth and technological advances, we are extremely lacking in spirituality. When the body and mind are stressed and harmed by various pressures from the external environment, and we are unable to adjust or adapt to them, mental disorders such as anxiety and depression usually result.

Buddhist Psychology identifies the source of all suffering. It shows us the meaning of life and guides all sentient beings to search the deeper powers of mind through the elimination of greed, anger, and ignorance from within. Its practice, if pursued freely and diligently, prevents any occurrence or reoccurrence of psychological illness. It aids people in cre-

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ating both physical and mental health so they can lead both joyful and fulfilling lives.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, Western psychology has absorbed considerable wisdom from Eastern cultures, especially Buddhist philosophy and practices. Based on this, it can be stated that Buddhist Psychology represents an important and comprehensive science of mental health. By adapting to the needs of people, Buddhist Psychology, along with other modalities, will meet the demands of our time by providing solutions to human problems and improving our well-being.

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## **About the Author**

### **Venerable Master Hsing Yun**

Venerable Master Hsing Yun was born in Jiangdu, Jiangsu Province, China, in 1927. Tonsured under Venerable Master Zhikai at age twelve, he became a novice monk at Qixia Vinaya School and Jiaoshan Buddhist College. He was fully ordained in 1941, and is the 48th Patriarch of the Linji (Rinzai) Chan School.

He went to Taiwan in 1949 where he undertook the revitalization of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism on the island with a range of activities novel for its time. In 1967, he founded the Fo Guang Shan (Buddha's Light Mountain) Buddhist Order, and has since established more than a hundred temples in Taiwan and on every continent worldwide. Hsi Lai Temple, the United States Headquarters of Fo Guang Shan, was built outside Los Angeles in 1988.

At present, there are nearly two thousand monks and nuns in the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order. The organization also oversees sixteen Buddhist colleges;

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five publishing houses, including Buddha's Light Publishing and Hsi Lai University Press; four universities, one of which is Hsi Lai University in Los Angeles; two nursing homes for the elderly; a secondary school; a satellite television station; and an orphanage.

A prolific writer and an inspiring speaker, Master Hsing Yun has written many books on Buddhist sutras and a wide spectrum of topics over the past five decades. Most of his speeches and lectures have been compiled into essays defining Humanistic Buddhism and outlining its practice. Some of his writings and lectures have been translated into various languages, such as English, Spanish, German, Russian, Japanese, Korean, etc.

The Venerable Master is also the founder of the Buddha's Light International Association, a worldwide organization of lay Buddhists dedicated to the propagation of Buddhism, with over 130 chapters and a membership of more than a million.

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## About Publisher

### **Buddha's Light Publishing F.G.S. Int'l Translation Center**

As long as Venerable Master Hsing Yun has been a Buddhist monk, he has had a strong belief that books and other documentation of the Buddha's teachings unite us emotionally, help us practice Buddhism at a higher altitude, and continuously challenge our views on how we define and live our lives.

In 1996, the Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center was established with this goal in mind. This marked the beginning of a string of publications translated into various languages from the Master's original writings in Chinese. Presently, several translation centers have been set up worldwide. Centers that coordinate translation or publication projects are located in Los Angeles and San Diego, USA; Sydney, Australia; Berlin, Germany; Argentina; South Africa; and Japan.

In 2001, Buddha's Light Publishing was estab-

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lished to publish Buddhist books translated by Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center as well as other valuable Buddhist works. Buddha's Light Publishing is committed to building bridges between East and West, Buddhist communities, and cultures. All proceeds from our book sales support Buddhist propagation efforts.

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