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Religious education and spiritual practice for the aged society
- the case study of the Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan

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Abstract:

For the aged society, what could religious organizations contribute is the key issue for all the religions nowadays. The Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan would be a great case for thinking about the social influence of religion in modern society.

As for Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, it mobilized the elderly people to join the charity work and environmental protection movement as practicing the Dharma in this-world for fulfilling their other-world rewards. At the same time, Dharma Drum Mountain teaches their elderly lay people to do Chan-Meditation and practice Buddha's teachings to enjoy their retirement, make their everyday life meaningful, and find their life purpose from life to death. Not only like this, the Fo Guang Shan Buddhism Monastery invited and encouraged their elderly volunteers to live a Buddhism way of life by doing Buddhism Chanting every day in their secular life for finding the way to become a better person and also a good spiritual leader to guide other people. For all of these three Humanistic Buddhism organizations in Taiwan, they all try to involve the retired people to be their influential volunteers or faith followers for well operating their organization. And the elderly people also found their second career and new social networks in these faith groups.

This essay will discuss how the Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan well initiate the elderly people to join the Buddhism organizations not only to find their meaning of life but also to cultivate their Dharma personality for practicing the inner subjectivity through the collective Dharma values.

From thinking how the religious organizations could benefit the aged society would be a great practical level for the mental issues under the demographic challenges. For the global ageing phenomena in modern society, we have to begin to pay attention not only to the related policy-making, but also the cultural representations of how the whole society treats the retired generation. The Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan successfully transformed the image of aged life, and created a field of social engagement for the elderly people. It would a meaningful case to elaborate the relationship of religions and aged society.

Key words: Aging Society、 Humanistic Buddhism、 Mental Health, Well-Being, Pure Land on Earth

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The phenomenon of global population ageing is more and more salient in the global society. As the definition of World Health Organization, when the national proportion of aged population above 65-and over in a society is more than 7%, it would be defined as the aging society. And if the aged population above 65-and over in a society is more than 14%, it would be defined as the aged society. Nowadays more and more developed countries are in the social condition of aged society. Some European countries like Germany and Italy are even become the hyper-aged society due to that its proportion of aged population above 65-and over is already more than 20% and it means that there would be one person older than 65 years among five people in these highly aged societies. Therefore, the ageing trend have become one of the most major challenges for the global policy issues. How to provide the well-being living condition of the aged people whom may not have the same social ties, economic status on productivity, public political life and also maybe original family roles and self-esteem would be an important issue for the global aging society.

Taiwan has also been in the democratically aging process for more than twenty years. In 2003, the Official statistics showed that national proportion of aged population above 65-and over in Taiwan had already been 9.2%. In 2006, it already became 10.0%. The latest statistics even shows that in 2012, the aged population above 65-and over have been 11.2% in Taiwan. In the meanwhile, the total fertility rate in Taiwan is also in decline and caused the trend of Fewer Children. Therefore, compared with the ageing process of the other developed countries, Taiwan is almost on the same course of going from an “aging society” to an “aged society.” How to face the different challenges that an aged society must happen right now and in the future will be a key issue that remained in all the diversity sectors of social systems in Taiwan for thinking about the suitable policy-making and civic mobilization.

In Taiwan, there are many religious organization and cults including Buddhism, Christian, and Taiwanese Folk Religions that may have the great resources to meet the challenges of the aged society. How could different kind of faith groups contribute the problems of an aging and aged society will be an important research area. This paper will discuss how the Humanistic Buddhism organizations guide their old lay people to

face their old age life. By taking the example of Tzu Chi, Fo Guang Shan and Dharma Drum Mountain as the cases for study, we will try to elaborate the possible contributions that religions may have in the aging society.

The following discussions will be divided into three parts. First, reviewing the research findings about the effects of religions upon an aging society. Second, analyzing that how the three Humanistic Buddhism organizations in Taiwan guide and mobilize the older adults in Taiwan Society, no matter as the NGO volunteers or the followers of the Buddhism Teachings. Third, this paper will also try to indicate the cultural meaning of how Humanistic Buddhism defined the concept of “aging” and will also discuss about how this cultural definition will contribute the ageing society.

Religion and the aging society

The social phenomena of aging and later life as the natural process of humankind and the basic element of the collective social life are getting to gain more and more attention in the aging society. Especially the living arrangement and Well-Being of the elderly in an aging society are really important social issues nowadays. At the policy-making level, how to ensure that all the elderly (especially the low-income elderly) could have sufficient social-welfare assurance including living-arrangement, health care, public leisure space, and economic support etc. may need further professional advices to find the better solution. But if the whole society only rely on initiating the policy-makings for the welfare of the elderly, it definitely may not be sufficient. For the elderly, the well-being of living is also very essential. This kind of well-being could not just depend on the tradition function of family or marriage. It would need more supports and mobilizations of the civil society. Therefore, what social function could religious organizations contribute to the aging society have already become a new research topic which attracted sociological thinking.

Some surveys have already indicated that the aging persons are more religious and faithful. The link between religion and well-being could be understood through three reasons as McFadden (2010) mentioned: The most important of all is that the elderly generation may have higher level of religious commitment and also attend the religious activities more often than the other generations. Furthermore, different religious institutions may also take delight in providing the religious services for the elderly to improve their well-being. It's because that religious traditions usually contains a lot of positive interpretation of long life that may be in contrary with the

popular negative stereotypes about the older people. (McFadden 2010:162) When the elderly join the religious activity and become more faithful, they may feel the sense of Well-Being and find the new meaning in their later life.

Some research has even begun to develop the theory of the connection among religion, aging, and health from the perspectives of sociologists and psychologists. For trying to better investigate the new emerging field of research at the intersection of religion and aging, especially the research findings involving health and well-being outcomes of the faithful elderly or some outcomes that it is still at crossroads (Levin, Jeff, Linda M. Chatters, and Robert Joseph Taylor, 2012). But when we think about the theory of religion and aging, we also have to pay attention to the differences between religious diversity. Since different religious tradition would supply different kinds of religious teachings or spiritual practices which usually embedded in the local cultural and social background. If we could notice about the cultural diversity for how the religions and aging are connected together, it would be more complete for developing the theory of religion and the aging society.

For Buddhism, there are three important factors that could mention as following and it may be its contribution to the aging society.

1. The positive interpretation of the later life

Sometimes Buddhist teachings have been misunderstood as being pessimistic in nature. But actually Buddhist depictions of aging are meant to be powerful antidotes to the conceit of youth and act as spurs to spiritual growth and realization (Lecso 1989). Aging is not negative for those whom practice Buddhism teachings in their everyday life. Actually, in Buddhism tradition, the elderly usually means people have the wisdom of life and the great compassion of the whole human beings.

2. Mental Health and Well-Being

The topic of “Buddhism and Wellbeing: Therapeutic Approaches to Human Flourishing” is going to gain more and more attention, and just held an academic conference in the university of British Columbia this year¹. This Conference showed that Buddhism has been a resource for practices, ideas, and worldviews in the long history that relate to well-being and would like to see how it could be flourishing in

¹ See the conference website: <http://buddhism.arts.ubc.ca/2014/10/06/upcoming-conference-may-2015/>

the physical and mental sense. A growing literature on Buddhism and mental health have already showed that Buddhist-derived meditation practices would contribute to cognitive therapeutic outcomes such as stress reduction, impulse control, and mood regulation. Some special issues like Buddhism, psychology, and mental health, or therapeutic dimensions of Buddhist ritual practice, and the ideas of “good health” and “disease” in terms of the physical and mental components etc., all these could be the important contributions to the aging society that still need further studies to investigate.

3. Identity and Belonging

In the aging society the elderly also have to face the problem about how to live well in their elderhood since their elder life may not count on the original relationship of family or marriage. The elderly people usually need a sense caring and accompanying, but it could not be possible in the aging society since young adults would not usually live together with their elder parents that some single elderly may even live by themselves. The phenomena of solitary elder are a serious issue for the aging society. How to ensure that these solitary elder could have the social connections and social supports? How to provide the new identities and belongings to the elderly whom have been retired from their workplace? These also would how religious organization and faith groups could contribute to the aging society.

Religion doctrines as inner faith and ultimate concern in the multiple social lives always give people the meaning of life and guide them to face the life difficulties. Numerous studies have found a positive relationship between various measures of religiosity and high levels of morale, life satisfaction, psychological health and other indicators of well-being and even the successful aging (Moberg 1993: 224). Aging people may not be the completely negative burden of the aging and aged society. We would like to investigate that how the religious teachings and the spiritual practice could bring the energetic meaning of “aging” in the elder people. Meanwhile, we would also be very interested at discussing about that how different kinds religions try to bring “a good life” to the elderly in the tread of modernization and aging society.

Three models of Taiwan Humanistic Buddhism

In Taiwan, living arrangement and the well-being of the elderly have been an important social-policy issue because that the decline in family size and the increase in nuclear families have changed the family structure over the last 50 years (James

Cherng-Tay Hsueh and Yun-Tung Wang 2008). When the household size have been in decline but the total households have increased rapidly, it meant that more and more aged people have not belonged to a traditional extended family but might live alone or just live with their spouse or partner. Some Buddhism organizations developed very rapidly in the last 50 years along with the changes of the family structure in Taiwan. These Buddhism organization including Tzu Chi Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation, Fo Guang Shan Buddhism Monastery and Dharma Drum Mountain, all of them practice the road of Humanistic Buddhism which focus on the pure-land on earth. It means that this kind of Humanistic Buddhism do not ask their followers to practice the Buddha teachings for the well-being in afterlife. On the contrary, they promoted the way of Humanistic Buddhism that would like to lead their followers to have well-being in life itself upon the real world. Therefore, the Humanistic Buddhism care about the suffering in the world and would like to think about the answers and solutions from the Buddhism teachings.

There are three action models of the Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan for responding to the aging society. The first model of Tzu Chi Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation is to gather the elder people to do the environmental volunteers for the earth. The second model of Dharma Drum Mountain is to give the educational program on Buddhism teaching and zen practice for the retired people. The third model of Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Temple chooses to put emphasis on the mental effects of Buddhism rituals and chanting which attracted many elderly people.

1. Environmental Volunteer

Tzu Chi Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation promoted the Environmental Protection Movement since 1991 in Taiwan Society and then spread this environmental protection work to global level. Dharma Master Cheng Yen as the leader of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation asserted that only chanting the Buddhism Sutures could not solve the suffering of the world, therefore she guided Tzu Chi's followers and volunteers to do the charity work and built hospitals as the medical-care work for the poor. The environmental protection work is one of the most important social practices of Tzu Chi now and it mobilized a lot of people to join this environmental volunteer, especially the elderly.

In local communities, people go to the branches of Tzu Chi to do the environmental work. They recycle different kinds of materials including papers, clothes, plastic jars,

aluminum can, Styrofoam, and glass etc. as the environmental work to protect the earth. Dharma Master Cheng Yen told that if people would love and care the earth more, the Mother-Earth will become more peaceful and suitable to live. She uses the simple Buddha Teachings to teach the environmental volunteers of Tzu Chi about taking the environmental work as one kind of Buddhist practice and also encouraged them to find the meaning of self-cultivating in this simple environmental work. Environmental Protection work in Tzu Chi do not just have the social meaning and the social effect of environmental protection, most important of all, it's also a Buddhism practice that guide the volunteers to purify their inner mind and thoughts from greed, hatred, and ignorance which are three key poisons that Buddha mentioned that could hurt the mental health of ourselves. Therefore, this kind of environmental protection work would also have the spiritual transformation effect for people whom really believe and take action by this as the practice of Buddha teachings.

Many retire people and even elderly people above 70 years old have found their social meaning for the society on this kind of environmental volunteer work. Since doing this kind of environmental volunteer work is not difficult task that do not need a lot of physical vigor, it just need to clean out and sort all the materials that could be recycled. So it is very suitable for the elderly to do this kind of work as some body exercise. We could see many elderly people come to Tzu Chi branches nearby their living area every day to do this kind of volunteer work. Tzu Chi is also like a big family for those whom do not live with their children. The elderly could find self-esteem and friendship in the world of Tzu Chi. This kind of material-recycling work also support the elderly in Taiwan to recall their younger life experience of those hard work. They found that doing this kind of environmental work could help them to be grateful and keep humble. And this is not only the social meaning for them but also the life values form them.

In the case of Tzu Chi, Buddhism developed a new model of environmental volunteer which could support the elderly to join the social practice for achieving their mental happiness and fulfillment.

2. Buddha teachings and Zen practice

Compared with Tzu Chi's environmental protection movement, Dharma Drum Mountain attracted many elderly people to come their local Zen centers for learn Buddhism teachings and meditation. Dharma Master Sheng-Yen was a famous Zen

master in Taiwan whom lead many retreats when he is alive in this world. People in Taiwan have been quite interested in listening his Buddhism Teachings and Dharma Talk on Zen. Dharma Drum Mountain now still has good tradition of Zen teachings. Learning Zen practice have become the spiritual recreation and relaxation of the retired people. After a long life journey of hardworking, these high-income and high-educational elderly people, they found that the Zen practice could comfort their busy mind and tired body. In addition, if take a more deep and long retreat, the zen practice could also make them know their inner mind better.

Dharma Drum Mountain does not highly assert that doing the volunteers of social service is important for the Buddhism practice. In contrast, Dharma Drum Mountain place emphasis mainly on the better quality of humankind. For example, how to practice the Buddhism Teachings in everyday life would be the most important teachings of Dharma Drum Mountain. No matter in family, in work place, or even just about the relationships between each other, every trial things in everyday life would be a moment for understanding ourselves better. Cultivating the better quality of ourselves would be the great basis of maintaining the ethic relationship with others.

For the social issues of the aging society, Dharma Drum Mountain promoted the concept of lifelong learning educational project for the elderly. This kind of Buddhism teachings programs are just open to the elder people above 65 years old. The key concept is that the aged people could be each other's best spiritual friends and even family members. Since they all experience the same social change and lived the long life journey, they may understand each other better and could give each other more consolations. Several cases even indicated the elderly whom joined the program of Dharma Drum Mountain have improved their relationship with their children. These elderly people found their new career plan after their retirement. Learning the Buddhism teaching, taking the Zen practice in everyday life would be totally new area for them to live a better aged life.

Some elderly really suffer from the emotional or mental problems. They might be afraid of future or even worry about their healthy and death. The Zen practice that Dharma Drum Mountain teaches would like to guide the elderly to relax themselves and understand that it's all the natural life process. By establishing the correct life attitude based on the Buddha teachings, the elderly may find the reasonable social support to live their aged life from this Buddhism community.

If the family ties in the aging society may not be as close as the traditional society, Dharma Drum Mountain shows a model of the connections of Buddha ways of life. The elderly will not feel alone since many people at the same life process are all learning the same Buddha teachings and taking effort to make their mental life happy and peaceful.

3. Buddhism Ritual Practice & Chanting

Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Temple founded by Dharma Master Sing Yun has been the biggest humanistic Buddhism organization in Taiwan. Contrary with Tzu Chi's huge global NGO, Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Temple and Buddha Memorial Center in Kaohsiung city are the sacred Buddhism symbols which have also expanded many Buddhism temples in local Taiwan and even reached out to the abroad. In the last fifty years, Fo Guang Shan successfully stretched to a variety of social sectors like education, media, and publishing. It also has mobilized a lot of lay followers to practice the Buddhism teachings.

As the legend of Buddha mentions, when Buddha was still a prince in the palace, he did not know the reality of the world and thought that life of all humankind are just beautiful and wonderful like how he lived in the palace. But when he had a chance to go out from the palace, he saw many strange scenes that deeply touched his mind. First, he saw the yogis in India whom had been pursuing the truth of life for quite a long time. And then, he also saw the poor, the sick, and the dead people on the road. By a deeply thinking of what he saw, he found that the real life world was not like his life in the palace. He was so confused and therefore, he made up his mind to leave the palace to begin his life journey for searching the true answer of this world. After experiencing a lot of difficulties, he finally got the enlightenment in a Bodhi tree when he finished a long and deep meditation. And then, he become the Buddha and gave lot of wisdom teachings for his followers and future generations until now. This story is not only widely shared in the teachings of Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Temple but also use the 4D video to show the great life of Buddha in the Buddha Memorial Center. In the educational programs of Fo Guang Shan, monks and nuns usually taught this story of Buddha's Life and encouraged the lay people to follow the path of Buddha and find the inner wisdom that they may not know before.

Many elderly people, especially the elder women, often came to the temples of Fo Guang Shan and sometimes even stay there for volunteers or rituals as they thought

that the temple is like their extended family. They try to learn the teachings of Buddha. Even though they might not understand it so well, they could just join the chanting and the Buddhist ritual for experiencing the atmosphere of collective chanting power for purification. They believed that chanting the Sutras will bless their afterlife and the whole family member's good fortune. They also think that by being a Buddhist will make them become a better person whom has good quality of personality.

Therefore, as the story of Buddha life suggested, Buddhism thinks that life is like a journey from life to death. What we have to do in this journey is to cultivate our inner wisdom and become a perfect person just like Buddha. Being aged is not the problem since everyone will all go through this life process. The key problem would be if the elderly people really have wisdom and compassion in their aged life, and it would be worthy to cultivate no matter how old we are.

Buddhism communities as the new spiritual Family

These three action models of Taiwan Humanistic Buddhism for the aging society would be the religious contributions to the aging problem nowadays. As for Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, it mobilized the elderly people to join the charity work and environmental protection movement as practicing the Dharma in this-world for fulfilling their other-world rewards. It could provide a place like the traditional family for the elderly people. By doing the environmental volunteer, they got the identity of Tzu Chi and have some kind of belonging.

In addition, Dharma Drum Mountain teaches their elderly lay people to do Chan-Meditation and practice Buddha's teachings to enjoy their retirement, make their everyday life meaningful, and find their life purpose from life to death. Mental health and the well-being are quite important for the elderly. The retired people have been keeping learning life wisdom in Dharma Drum Mountain. They would like to take their own responsibility of their aged life and choose to have a healthy mental mind for the well-being of their whole life.

Just like that Fo Guang Shan Buddhism Monastery invited and encouraged their elderly volunteers to live a Buddhism way of life by doing Buddhism Chanting every day in their secular life for finding the way to become a better person and also a good spiritual leader to guide other people. This kind of Humanistic Buddhism try to elaborate that the later life would be full of the meaning of life if the aged would like

to cultivate their inner wisdom and compassion.

For all of these three Humanistic Buddhism organizations in Taiwan, they all try to involve the retired people to be their influential volunteers or faith followers for well operating their organization. And the elderly people also found their second career and new social networks in these faith groups. For the elderly people, the Buddhist communities are just like their new spiritual family. The elderly in the aging society may not be the lonely elderly people that have no social connections. The Buddhism communities would like to welcome them to go home to join their multiple action models.

Implications and Conclusion: Buddhism and the image of the aging

This essay discussed how the Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan well initiate the elderly people to join the Buddhism organizations not only to find their meaning of life but also to cultivate their Dharma personality for practicing the inner subjectivity through the collective Dharma values.

From thinking how the religious organizations could benefit the aged society would be a great practical level for the mental issues under the demographic challenges. For the global ageing phenomena in modern society, we have to begin to pay attention not only to the related policy-making, but also the cultural representations of how the whole society treats the retired generation. And we think that the Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan not only successfully transformed the image of aged life, but also created a field of social engagement for the elderly people. It would a meaningful case to elaborate the relationship of religions and aged society.

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