

Conference Report on the 4th World Buddhist Forum in China: Exploring the Value of Buddhism in Modern Times

By Vivian Fung¹

As the Autumn sun shone on the banks of Lake Taihu at Wuxi near Shanghai, over a thousand Buddhist dignitaries and scholars from all over the world gathered to explore the meaning of Buddhism and its value in today's world.

The Fourth World Buddhist Forum (WBF) was held at Wuxi's Lingshan Mountain in Wuxi, Jiangsu province, on the 24th and 25th of October, 2015. The venue, which combines mountain scenery and the famous lake, is ideal for conferencing as well as for visitors interested in Buddhism. With its giant Buddha statue, the impressive Fangong Palace, the Tibetan Temple, gardens and other attractions, Lingshan Scenic Spot is now the permanent host site for the Forum. Started in 2006, the WBF has been hosted in the cities of Hangzhou, Wuxi, Taipei and Hong Kong.



Fangong Palace, Lingshan Mountain.²

With its return to Wuxi, the Fourth World Buddhist Forum was co-hosted by the Buddhist Association of China and the China Religions Cultural Communication Association, and organised by the 4th WBF Jiangsu Committee. Jiangsu Province, to which Wuxi belongs, has

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² Photographs ©R. James Ferguson 2015

been increasing its cultural profile since the mid-1990s. Wuxi itself has been described as “a renowned ancient city of the province” and “one of China’s modern industrial and commercial hubs”.³

Addressing theme of “Common Aspiration, Common Action – Embracing Exchanges and Mutual Learning,” the 4th WBF ran its conference sessions at the Fangong Palace. These sessions included a Buddhist peace forum,⁴ a Buddhist education forum, a Buddhist youth forum on the issues of responsibility and accountability, an exchanges and communication forum concerning Buddhist civilization, as well as TV forums dealing with such themes of Buddhism and science, while the new media forums looked at Buddhism and the Internet, as well as Buddhism and corporate culture.



The Giant Buddha viewed from Fangong Palace

These activities were well summed up by the Declaration of the 4th World Buddhist Forum at the closing ceremony which stated that: “we have deliberated with positive results through exchanging ideas, sharing experiences, expressing concerns, and reaching consensus on topics including Buddhism and Peace, Buddhism and Civilization, Buddhism and Charity, Buddhist Education, Sangha Building, Buddhist Missionary Works, Buddhist Youths and more”.⁵

³ Zhuan Ti, ‘Buddhism Forum Gets Underway’, *China Daily*, 24-25 Oct. 2015, p. 12.

⁴ *Culture Mandala* editors and International Relations academics, Dr R. James Ferguson and Dr Rosita Dellios, presented their paper on ‘New Buddhist Silk Roads’ at this session.

⁵ ‘Declaration of the 4th World Buddhist Forum’, Miaoyin Hall, Fangong Palace, Lingshan Scenic Spot, Wuxi, 25 Oct, 2015.

Drawing on the Buddhist concept of co-dependent origination which stresses interdependence, the Declaration continued:

“Living beings, including humans, are co-dependent and symbiotic. To sustain world peace and global prosperity, cultural variance and religious pluralism must be treated with the spirit of harmonious coexisting, mutual learning, and mutual appreciation. For 2,600 years since the founding of Buddhism, venerables of the sangha and laity alike have all along devoted faithfully to the propagating of Dharma and salvation of all beings. Uncompromising toward any hardship, they have been striving to build a network bridging people of different civilizations, near or far, such that the compassionate light of Buddha can illuminate the whole world.”

Following their footsteps, the Declaration then advocated nine endeavours:

1. to strengthen exchanges among Buddhists of all countries and regions for better understanding, friendship and co-operation;
2. to strengthen comparative studies of Buddhist literatures under different language systems with the view of promoting contemporary interpretation and propagation;
3. to improve mutual learning among Buddhist communities worldwide on sangha building and organizing, and to enhance synergism among members of sangha for preserving the authenticity of the Dharma;
4. to increase co-operation among Buddhist educational setups in all countries and regions through exchanges of students and scholars, and sharing of teaching and research resources so as to facilitate the inheriting of Buddhist cultural legacy;
5. to strengthen the sharing of experiences in Dharma propagation activities for the benefit of living beings among Buddhist communities worldwide, and to jointly explore the appropriate strategy for missionary works against the backdrop of information era and globalization, for the wide-spreading of Buddha’s teachings;
6. to develop and coordinate international Buddhist charitable services such as disaster relief, poverty alleviation, and ecological protection, and to provoke the Buddhist spirit of alms giving and compassion, to provide for the welfare of living beings, and create Pure Land on Earth;
7. to develop international recreational programs for Buddhist youths, grooming their sense of responsibility and mission, and preparing them to become talents in Buddhist practice and missionary works, such that they can proficiently carry the Buddhist traditions into the future;
8. to promote dialogues between different religions emphasizing tolerance, understanding and respect, to co-operate with other religions in projects on charity, arts, ecological protection, conflict resolution, mediation, peace, etc., and to jointly contribute towards the betterment of human destiny; and
9. to strengthen the merging of Buddhism with modern technological civilization, making use of new development in technology to enhance the modus operandi and strategy of Buddhist missionary works, and to provide food for thought on the advancement of human civilization facing the technological development and its induced social issues.

The Declaration, which was read out before the vast assembly of delegates in Chinese and then in English,⁶ concluded:

“We sincerely invite all Buddhist followers in the world to join efforts in upholding the spirit of The Four Immeasurable while sustaining the mission of our forerunners, and in practicing skilful means for the cohesion of positive dynamics and promotion of mutual learning, such that we may contribute our wisdom for the resolution of global problems now challenging human existence, and for the pursuing of a better human destiny.”

The Forum as well covered by the media and the English language *China Daily* picked up on the ecological message of the Forum: “Some Buddhist representatives have called for a bigger role for Buddhists in ecological protection, especially in the ban on the ivory trade, as some Buddha statues and prayer beads are made from ivory products.”⁷ The article quotes the Venerable Master Hong Ming, abbot of the Guangzong Temple in Hong Kong and vice-president of the Hong Kong Buddhist Association, as saying that it was against the Buddha Dharma to use ivory products in Buddhist temples: “The Dharma teaches us to refrain from killing, and using ivory is against such teaching.” The article also quoted the Reverend Master Heng Sure, from the Institute for World Religions in the United States, as saying it was wrong to waste life just for decoration: “When you tear apart an animal’s body just to decorate something, that makes no sense to me. I think Buddhists should speak up about protecting life of all kinds.”



New Technology To Help Buddhism’s Active Role in the Modern World

⁶ The English version was read out by Reverend Master Heng Sure, a Buddhist master at the Institute for World Religions in the United States, and an adjunct professor of Buddhist philosophy at Australia’s Bond University. Dr Heng Sure also presented in the forum sessions, dealing with youth and education.

⁷ Xu Wei, ‘Buddhists asked to develop ecological protection services’, *China Daily*, 26 Oct. 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-10/26/content_22287883.htm