BUDDHIST-BASED UNIVERSITIES IN THE UNITED STATES

Searching for a New Model in Higher Education

TANYA STORCH

"This groundbreaking book is of the utmost importance for American academia. In an era marked by constant distraction and the commodification of knowledge, Buddhist universities in the United States have found ways to imbue education with the values of mindfulness, interrelatedness of all life, and right motivation for education. Through an extensive examination of four Buddhist universities and input from other major institutions such as the GTU Institute of Buddhist Studies, Professor Storch shows how this pedagogical shift is achieved, why it is successful, and how it functions in the student life. This important work does, in fact, offer a 'New Model in Higher Education.'"

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—DANIEL CLARKSON FISHER, former associate professor and chair, Buddhist Chaplaincy Department at University of the West

Buddhist-Based Universities in the United States: Searching for a New Model in Higher Education investigates four Buddhist universities in the United States of America, each of which offers degrees in liberal arts and professional fields while simultaneously educating their students in the philosophy and practices of Buddhism. Buddhist universities in the United States are unique, as there are no comparable universities in other Western cultures.

TANYA STORCH is professor of religious studies at the University of the Pacific.

Lexington Books
An imprint of
Rowman & Littlefield
800-462-6420 • www.rowman.com

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Searching for a New Model in Higher Education

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常州大学图书馆
藏书章

LEXINGTON BOOKS
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Lexington Books
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Storch, Tanya.
Buddhist-based universities in the United States : searching for a new model in higher education / Tanya Storch.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-7391-8408-0 (cloth : alk. paper) – ISBN 978-0-7391-8409-7 (ebook)
1. Buddhist universities and colleges–United States. 2. Education, Higher–Religious aspects–Buddhism. I. Title.
LC929.7.U6S76 2015
378'.070973–dc23
2015004690

∞™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

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Buddhist-Based Universities in the United States

Introduction

Buddhist-based, Buddhist-inspired, or simply Buddhist University are synonymous terms which I use in reference to a particular type of institution of higher learning: a university that is state-accredited, which offers degrees in liberal arts and professional fields, and at the same time uses Buddhist pedagogical principles.

The Buddhist universities which I write about in this book are different from institutions specializing in teaching Buddhist philosophy and practice to lay people wishing to develop a Buddhist lifestyle, or monastics wishing to become clergy, for the latter do not offer programs in liberal arts and professional fields. Diamond Mountain University in Arizona, Won Institute of Graduate Studies in Pennsylvania, Institute of Buddhist Studies in Hawaii, or Dhammakaya Open University in California all are good examples of this type of institution. But the Buddhist-based universities which I am interested in are represented by:

1. University of the West, founded on the principles of Taiwanese Buddhism in 1991 by Master Xingyun and located in Rosemead, CA;
2. Dharma Realm Buddhist University, founded on the principles of Chinese Buddhism in 1976 by Master Xuan Hua and located in the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, CA;
3. Naropa University, founded on the principles of Tibetan Buddhism in 1974 by Lama Chogyam Trungpa and located in Boulder, CO; and
4. Soka University of America, founded on the principles of Japanese Soka Gakkai in 1987 by Mr. Ikeda Daisaku and located in Aliso Viejo, CA.[1]

To begin with, very little is known about these four universities not only by the general public but even in academic circles. Hundreds of books are published annually which discuss philosophy and history of Buddhism, yet most specialists in the history of American Buddhism are unaware that there are four Buddhist-inspired universities in the United States which function with a good degree of success in a present-day troubled economy, and despite many problems befalling American education.[2] They attract students from all segments of the population and are extremely diverse in an ethnical, cultural, and religious sense, enrolling students from nearly forty countries. Buddhist universities are self-sustained, and hundreds of their graduates annually join the national work-force, carrying with them not merely professional skills but a unique perspective on life that favors interconnectedness, mindfulness, and compassion for all living beings.

Buddhist universities are unique because, although other Asian religions, such as Hinduism, Bahaism, Sikhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, enjoy wide cultural-social support, none of the above has created an institution of higher learning comparable to a Buddhist-based university. To further this notion of uniqueness, one must be reminded that the United States has only two Jewish Universities[3] and only one Islamic University[4] which are typologically similar to the Buddhist universities of our study—they, too, offer degrees in professional fields and liberal arts and, at the same time, build the entire educational experience on moral, spiritual, and philosophical principles of their given religions. The Buddhist-based universities must also be recognized as a new global phenomenon because they do not exist in other Western countries known for their religious tolerance and political will to experiment with new forms of education.

Another even more important reason that attracted me to studying Buddhist universities in the United States, is my deep concern (shared by many of my colleagues) about the future of American higher education. I have served as a Professor of Religious Studies at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque; the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; the University of Florida, Gainesville; and currently at the University of the Pacific, Stockton; and I have observed throughout many years of teaching how students' and faculties' attitudes toward higher education have slowly filled with what must be characterized as cynicism and despair. What is failing higher education today is not merely its cost. According to recent polls conducted by the Pew Research Center, *Time Magazine*, and the Carnegie Corporation, more than 50 percent of American adults think that higher education is in crisis and moving in the wrong direction, at the same time, more than 60 percent of senior higher education administrators express the opinion that their sector of education is in crisis (Budwig, Sandell, Selingo, Arum, and online public forum, "Colleges in Crisis").

Now, compared to this, the educational processes and experiences I had the fortune to observe and study at the Buddhist-based universities must be characterized (and they have been consistently characterized by all people involved in them) as being purposeful, useful in real life, and driven by a mission to improve human character and help communities; in short, these have been characterized by all the people interviewed for the book as *leading in the right direction.*

Studying Buddhist-based universities convinced me that the "right kind" of education is still possible. It will definitely require internal changes at all levels, but it can be done, because the "secret" of the Buddhist universities' success is not in their affiliation with particular spiritual traditions, but in that, by following pedagogical principles developed within these traditions, they established the "right" moral foundation and "right" motivation for providing higher education to their students. In the system they have created, nobody falls through the cracks, and everybody works together, from a custodian to the president, to achieve the commonly shared goals. This type of pedagogy is based on the notions of oneness and interconnectedness, where a university's community is seen as one family. This, of course, does not lead to lowering standards of academic performance, as some may suspect. Contrary to this, students graduating from the Buddhist-inspired universities demonstrate high levels of academic and professional preparedness. For instance, nearly 40 percent of Soka University's graduates went on to graduate programs according to *2008 Peterson's Guide to Four Year College*; this is significantly higher than the national average of barely 20 percent. At the same time, the graduation rate from Buddhist-based universities is close to 90 percent (compared to barely above 50 percent nation-wide); and more than 80 percent of graduates find work in their chosen professions. All of them report that they enjoy a high degree of satisfaction (eight or higher on a ten point scale) from their lives, professions, and especially, from the sense of having purpose to their life and being prepared for its psychological challenges.

This book is meant to initiate a public discussion of education that is offered by Buddhist pedagogy. It seems that, with our higher education being in serious crisis, its positive experiences need to be studied and understood for potential application on other campuses.

NOTES

1. It is most likely that Maitripa College in Portland, OR, which was established in 2006 as a Tibetan Buddhist Theosophical College, will become the fifth Buddhist University in the United States. It is currently affiliated with the Foundation for Preservation of the Mahayana Traditions and is applying for regional accreditation.

2. To the best of my knowledge, there is not a single monograph dedicated to the history of, and educational programs at, American Buddhist universities. The history of the Naropa

University has been studied somewhat better due to the popularity of its founder among the influential social-cultural activists of the '70s and '80s.

3. Yeshiva University was founded in 1886 in New York. Today it combines contemporary academic programs with the moral teachings of the Torah. In 2007, the American Jewish University (AJU) was created as a result of merging the University of Judaism with Brandeis-Bardin College. It offers degrees in bioethics, psychology, liberal arts, business, communication, political science, and Jewish studies.

4. Islamic American University (IAU) in Southfield, Michigan, offers courses in history and spiritual teachings of Islam along with the degrees in Liberal Arts and several professional fields.

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Chapter One

University of the West

FIRST ENCOUNTER

For each of the four Buddhist-based universities, I give a description of my first encounter with the university's campus. I'm doing so for two reasons. One is that the first impression of the campus characterizes a college or university more than any other potential information students may receive about the institution they plan to attend (Selingo, 30–33). But my second reason is even more important. In the last decades, our colleges and universities have nearly completely succumbed to a market-model of selling higher education. Campuses have been turned into a primary marketing tool in this process, and they are now attracting students by boasting of the most luxurious environments they can provide, and by promising to satisfy every material desire students may have. Such campuses look more like expensive hotels and upscale resorts than places inviting our young people to study and pursue their moral and intellectual cultivation.[1]

Against this background, visiting the Buddhist-based universities was a real relief and a breath of fresh air. Not a single one of them looked like a resort or expensive hotel, and yet, their architectural and natural beauty was obvious. Even more impressive for me was discovering the dignified and inexpensive ways in which this has been accomplished.

The beauty of these campuses, I dare to say, is consistent with the goals of the Buddhist-based education pursued in the classrooms such as the mindful approach to the environment as well as people spending time with nature, self-reflection and meditation, and cultivation of peaceful and resourceful approaches to problem-solving. These campuses' simple, elegant, and artistic forms remind everyone of the very purpose for being there, which is to provide and receive well-rounded liberal and professional education while pursuing personal growth and cultivation, and to learn about global human interconnectedness and how to be a good member of a large community. All structural, internal, and landscape designs are aligned with these principles, and everything is purposely constructed to hold the ultimate honorable goal: to raise future generations who will not be solely dedicated to making money and satisfying material desires, but who will learn to be conscientious human beings living in harmony with others and with their natural surroundings.

This is why I paid serious attention to each Buddhist campus and learned how it is organized in addition to learning about its history, academic programs, faculty, and students. So, let us now have our first encounter with the University of the West (UWest). When we arrive here, we enter a different world, compared to the busy, polluted, and highly congested districts of Los Angeles. When we begin our walk, there is a sense of having stepped into a place that is very different from the rest of the city not only because the environs are clean and beautiful, but because we are surrounded by an unusual sense of peace and quiet. We can actually hear nature—birds, fountains,

and rustling of leaves—because they appear against the background of an ever-present, soothing silence. The sounds of human activities are gentle and conducted with the awareness of the presence of others. Loud sounds of television and music are absent. There are no disruptive noises from the leaf-blowers. Nor do we hear people speaking in loud or angry voices to each other and on their mobile phones. Everyone on this campus is polite and everyone immediately attends to the needs of a stranger (at first, I was shocked by this, and it felt unreal).

The central experience of UWest involves walking on a long road, surrounded on both sides by tall cypress trees. This road goes continuously up, creating a bit of a challenge for someone who is out of shape. It also symbolically represents the challenges people encounter here when they become students, for they will struggle with themselves trying to reach the highest level of consciousness and to fully realize their human potential. Noteworthy, there are three options one can choose from while climbing the road. One can climb all the way up, exercise one's legs, and get plenty of oxygen for the lungs. Or, one can use the elevator from half-way if one is injured, or disabled, or must arrive faster. The third is what I would call the esoteric option. In one place on the road, one can walk between the two cypresses and arrive to the top rather easily. Only those who have stayed on campus long enough know about this third option, which compels me to quote Master Xingyun, the university's founder: "Buildings do not speak, nor do flowers and grass have anything to say, and yet, if you listen ever so carefully, you will hear the Dharma being spoken everywhere" (Fu, 123).

I chose to walk all the way up to the top and needed a few minutes to catch my breath. Then, I turned to the left, toward the edge of the cliff, and came across a small wooden structure painted white. It stands by itself on the edge of the cliff. It is a Meditation Pavilion. Because of its location right on the edge of the cliff, one can see the distant dark-blue mountains on the horizon. But when one sits down in meditation, one sees the district with cars, shops, and restaurants underneath the feet. The pavilion is built in a traditional Chinese style. Sitting there, with the sounds of chimes and the lotus symbol suspended from the ceiling, brings such a palpable sense of calm and peace—gifts so precious and so difficult to find in our fast-paced and anxiety-filled world.

When other people walked by the Meditation Pavilion, they stopped talking, or if they had to carry on with a conversation, they walked some distance away from it. Every time I sat in that wooden pavilion on the edge of the cliff, I felt peace. My wish is for every American campus to have a place like this—a place where human consciousness can rest and all the worries of the world stop for just a few minutes. Creating such a place on every campus would take a small administrative effort and tiny financial investment, but it would give so much to the students.

Not far from the Meditation Pavilion, there is the "dining hall" with an open deck that overlooks the mountains and is covered by tree branches. One can eat indoors or under the open sky. Eating in the dining hall, three meals a day, is very inexpensive, especially compared to other universities. Food tastes good because the ingredients are purchased from local producers. Help from a local community, and the university's community itself, is often donated to the kitchen.[2]

Our encounter with UWest will not be complete without mentioning that one meets here real Buddhist nuns and monks who participate in the campus's life on par with all other students.[3] These monastics come from more than thirty different countries and, while they could have pursued their education in the institutions specifically designed for the Buddhist clergy, their choice of UWest is made for a purpose—to live and learn in the same environment in which regular American students live and learn. Not all Buddhist-based universities have nuns and monks present on their campuses; and when they do, not all campuses provide for a regular communication between the secular and monastic students as in UWest.

LIFE OF MASTER XINGYUN, FOUNDER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST

As already mentioned, the University of the West was founded in 1991 by Master Xingyun.[4] Xingyun represents Taiwanese Foguangshan (Buddha's Light Mountain)[5] monastic order and Humanistic Buddhist traditions (Chandler, 28–78). His most full biography in English appeared in 2008 as a translation from Chinese (Fu) made by Robert Smitheram under the title *Bright Star, Luminous Cloud: The Life of a Simple Monk*. According to this biography, Xingyun was born in 1927 in a small town of Jiangdu in Jiangsu province. His secular name (that was changed when he accepted monastic vows) was Guoshen. His father supported the family by going from place to place operating a small business, and his mother was a typical housewife of that time who shouldered all the responsibilities for the household and cared for the children (Fu, 15).

Because Xingyun was born the second son, his mother lovingly nicknamed him "Second Lord." Besides him, she had three more children, and every one of them appeared to be normal, except for Guoshen. Unusual signs, according to his mother's witness, were seen from his birth. He had one strange birthmark in particular: one side of his face was bright red, while the other was pale, and in the middle of his upper lip, there were two bright red lines. Because of these signs, his mother did not allow him to go out until he was three years old and the marks had nearly disappeared. She also remembered him as a hardworking child who did chores on his own; for

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