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Than Hsiang Temple: From Womb to Tomb

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ABSTRACT

Than Hsiang Temple established in the 90's by Ven Wei Wu subscribes to the 4 Pillars of Conviction:

“The Young to Learn
The Strong and Healthy to Serve
The Aged and Sick to be Cared for
The Departed to Find Spiritual Destination.”

With these as the guiding principles, all the Temple activities are aimed at promoting Buddhist education, welfare and cultivation. The temple provides preschool education,

Sunday school and weekly Dhamma class; supports the Phor Tay School and the International Buddhist College to promote Buddhist education. The people's welfare is taken care of by the Mitra counselling department, Free Metta Clinic, Wan Ching Yuan old folks home, daily vegetarian food based on donation and monthly visits to the poor to provide basic necessities. The cultivation aspect is enhanced with daily chanting, weekly meditation class, monthly eight precepts cultivation and yearly retreats. The departed are offered special prayers and their ashes housed in the Temple's columbarium. This paper aims to explore and highlight the educational, social, cultural and spiritual significance of the role of the temple in the journey of life from the womb to the tomb.

Introduction

The role of a Buddhist Temple is to provide a place of cultivation and a source of Buddhist knowledge for the four components of the Buddhist society: the monastic, both monks and nuns and the lay devotees both males and females. This paper seeks to present Than Hsiang's core principles and practices and the role it plays in the educational, social, cultural and spiritual development of its family of monastic, devotees, members and staff. Than Hsiang Temple which started off from very humble beginnings as the Bayan Baru Buddhist Association at a residential house has today grown not only physically into an impressive six-storey building but has spread its influence with branches located from the North to the South of Peninsula Malaysia and with an International Buddhist College set up in Thailand.

THAN HSIANG BRANCHES throughout Malaysia

1. Than Hsiang Temple (Main Center)
2. Tham Wah Wan Temple in Kuala Lumpur
3. Than Hsiang Jing Yuan, Klang
4. Than Hsiang Chan Yuan, Bukit Mertajam
5. Than Hsiang Jing Yuan, Sungai Petani
6. Than Hsiang Mitra Welfare Association (Penang & Klang Valley)
7. Wan Ching Yuen Old Folks Welfare Home, (Penang, Petaling Jaya, Sungai Petani)

8. Wan Ching Yuen Old Folks Paying Home (Sungai Ara, Penang)
9. Than Hsiang Pajam in Negeri Sembilan with branches at Taman Baiduri, Taman Makmur and Taman Galena and a branch in Bandar Teknologi, Selangor.
10. Than Hsiang Kindergartens (Main centre at Penang + 9 other branches)
11. International Buddhist College with a campus each in Sadao and Korat, Thailand

The Founder of Than Hsiang Temple

Ven. Wei Wu was a successful corporate figure before he ordained as a Buddhist monk under Ven. Xiu Jing who was from China in the Chan (Zen) Linji (临济) lineage in 1992. He received his higher ordination at Xi Lai Temple in the U.S. in 1992. Subsequently, he received the Chan Caodong (曹洞) Dharma Lineage from Venerable Bo Yuan in 1995. According to the Venerable Wei Wu, Chinese Buddhism is not sectarian in practice. Thus even though he was ordained under the Chan lineage, his main practice is Amitabha Pure Land Buddhism. He applied modern management techniques like Total Quality Management and found them useful and effective in the running of the Than Hsiang Foundation.

The Than Hsiang Foundation established in January 1990 by Ven Wei Wu is first and foremost a religious organization founded on the Buddha's teachings of Wisdom and Compassion seeking to promote Buddhist education, welfare and cultivation based on the Four Pillars of Conviction :

For The Young to Learn,
The Strong and Healthy to Serve,
The Aged and Sick to be Cared For,
The Departed to Find Spiritual Destination.

For The Young to Learn: Than Hsiang Kindergarten

Venerable Wei Wu's emphasis on education especially early education is implemented with the establishment of the Than Hsiang Kindergarten in 1991. The Early Education Curriculum is approved by the Malaysian government and thus accepts students of all races and religion. Its core teaching and practice is based on the Ten Meritorious Principles or Ten Good Deeds which are universal principles that transcend race and religious ideology. This set of moral principles was brought into Malaysia by a Taiwanese monk, Venerable Hui Tian. The original Buddhist version of the Ten Good Deeds has been adapted to suit the multi-racial and multi-religious environment in Malaysia so that it is acceptable to all races. In order to achieve success and commitment the kindergarten has introduced three separate versions of the Ten Meritorious Principles for the children, teachers and parents and a yearly transmission ceremony by the Sangha to emphasise its significance. Presently there are more than 800 students enrolled in the main Than Hsiang Kindergarten and nine other branches in Sungai Ara, Farlim, Sungai Petani, Bukit Mertajam, Simpang Ampat, Juru, and Permatang Pauh, and the Klang Valley.

Facility and Service to support Early Education

Besides providing early childhood education, Than Hsiang's social responsibility towards the young also includes providing quality child care and before and after school care for young children to meet the needs of busy working parents who can rest assured that their child will be safe under the loving care and guidance of trained caregivers. Child Care Centres provide full day and half-day care services. There is a racial mix of children in these Centres, so children will learn from a very young age on how to live in racial harmony in the multi-lingual environment of Malaysia.

Facility and Service to support Primary Education

The Before and After School Care is for primary school children who range from age 7 to 12 years. These centres are set up nearby to well-established Chinese schools. Experienced, retired primary school teachers act as efficient mentors and caring nannies. Being trained teachers, they are most capable of guiding the children in their schoolwork and

providing them with extra tuition whenever necessary. As a good friend, they lend an attentive ear to the problems faced by the children in school and also at home. They also share in the children's joy and achievements in school.

For The Young to Learn: The Role of Than Hsiang in Secular Education

Than Hsiang Foundation has secured itself a role in secular education through the appointment of Venerable Wei Wu as the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Phor Tay Schools. Than Hsiang provides spiritual and financial support to the Phor Tay (Bodhi) Schools comprising of

1. Phor Tay Kindergarten
2. Phor Tay Primary School
3. Phor Tay Secondary School
4. Phor Tay Private School

The Phor Tay Primary and Secondary Schools are the only government schools in Malaysia where Buddhist Studies is part of the school curriculum. In 2012, the Sangha members, the school teachers and devotees from the Than Hsiang Temple put in a joint effort to reactivate and improve Buddhist education in the Phor Tay Schools. A multimedia approach was formulated and taught to Form One to Form Three students. Buddhist etiquette and The Ten Good Deeds is taught to the Form One students. The Form Three curriculum focuses on the Fourfold Grace, Five Precepts, Six Paramitas and Eightfold Path. The school authorities also transmit the Ten Good Deeds to the students at a special annual ceremony witnessed by the Sangha member. In order to foster better parent-child relationship and create a warm and pleasant school environment, a thanks-giving gathering is held once every 4 months. Dharma Assembly and Prior Examination Blessings events for the students are organised in order to give confidence and instil religious faith and psychological support for the students before they sit for their government examinations. In view of familiarizing the students with applications of the Ten Good Deeds in daily life, a series of activities which includes visits to the old folks in Than Hsiang Temple are organised for the Form Three students after they have completed their public school examination towards the end of the year. The school authority emphasises that the students put the Ten Good Deeds especially

“to be filial to parents” and “to honour teachers and elders” in their daily life practice by being filial at home and good students in school. Children Camps are also organised to inculcate core Buddhist values and to encourage children to put the Dharma into their daily life practice. During the Wesak Day celebration, Baby Buddha Bathing Ceremony and dana offering to the Sangha members are organised. All these activities are carried out with the intention to instil Buddhist faith in the students, teachers and parents.

Facility and Service to support Dharma Teachers: Fu Zhi Teachers’ Fellowship

The Fu Zhi Teachers’ Fellowship was founded in 2011 to provide training and support for the Dharma Teachers. Its members come from the four Phor Tay Schools, Than Hsiang Kindergartens and the Than Hsiang Sunday Dharma Class. Its main aim is to promote Buddhist teaching, thus shaping the students all-round personality development. It hopes to enhance the knowledge and understanding of the Buddha Dharma and the importance of Buddhist education through actively promoting the culture and mottos of the four Phor Tay Schools. It provides a platform for interaction among the teachers so as to stimulate the enthusiasm of the teachers of the Dharma Class who in turn nurture and guide the students towards the direction of being a good child, a good student, a good youth and a good citizen; to share constructive teaching skills and positive teaching experiences; thus achieving the purposes of effective teaching and learning.

Apart from promoting the Buddha’s teachings and inculcating Buddhist ethics among teachers and students, Than Hsiang Temple also plays an active role in the various fund raising events organised yearly to provide financial support for the four Phor Tay schools.

For The Young to Learn: Sunday Dharma School

Another department that provides informal Buddhist Education is the Sunday Dharma School which promotes Buddhist education to children and their parents. Children of the Sunday Dharma School (SDS) are taught basic Buddhist Teachings centred on the practice of the **Ten Good Deeds**, all SDS students participate in the Transmission of the Ten Meritorious

Principles in a yearly ceremony administered by the Sangha. The SDS organises camps with themes like “Appreciation and Gratitude” to instil core values and practices in the primary and secondary pupils during the school holidays. These camps are well participated by the Sunday Dharma School children who number more than 200. Besides student classes, parents are also required to attend parenting skills classes conducted by SDS. The interaction between the parents and students is very encouraging as evidenced by the strong support towards activities that included visits to old folks homes, alms giving and offerings to the Sangha, seminars on parenting, interactive games for parents and children and family days. In order to enhance religious cultivation and noble qualities among the Sunday School teachers, SDS also conducts half-day cultivation activities and programs to upgrade teachers’ personal and spiritual development. All teachers are encouraged to attend teacher training courses conducted by the Fu Zhi Teachers Fellowship to upgrade their teaching skills.

For The Young to Learn: The International Buddhist College

The continuity of Buddhist Education up to the tertiary level is offered by the International Buddhist College (IBC) which was set up in Southern Thailand in 2004. IBC offers students a unique opportunity of experiencing a comprehensive in-depth study of Buddhism from a non-sectarian point of view through acquiring knowledge and understanding of the three different schools and traditions of Buddhism. Its philosophy is to provide Buddhist education in an environment for learning and practice within the three main traditions of Buddhism, namely Theravada, Chinese and Tibetan. Being truly international, IBC uses both English and Chinese as media of instruction and presently has students and teachers from more than 20 countries. A unique feature is the equal emphasis on study and practice. IBC aims to become an internationally recognized centre for Buddhist studies. It started off with just 30 students taking the BA course in Sadao in 2004. Today, at its main branch in Korat, North-eastern Thailand, it has over 100 students pursuing BA, MA and PhD Buddhist courses in both Chinese and English media. Besides in-campus classes, an e-Learning MA program operating from Than Hsiang Temple, Penang is available for international students to pursue an MA course in Buddhism via the Internet. Than Hsiang Temple and IBC jointly organises an annual Buddhist Conference in Penang or Kuala Lumpur to enhance Buddhist research and scholarship which is well attended by scholars,

students and devotees. To inculcate Buddhist values and practices amongst the students and the local community, religious Buddhist activities such as Wesak and Kathina celebrations are held annually. Weekend Dharma Classes in Chinese and English taught by the students are organised to instil Buddhist Knowledge to the local Thai people. The campus is vigorously promoting charity work, including free medical services. The health of the staff and students of IBC and the local Thai people are taken care of by the Metta Mobile Free Clinic led by Brother Goh Guo Chiang from Penang. The distribution of clothing and essentials is organised when natural disasters like floods and fires strike the local people. In total, more than 1000 local people have received these aids. The international component of the IBC staff and students are encouraged to study both Thai and Malaysian cultures and to mingle freely with each other to promote mutual respect and understanding. Such multi-cultural exchanges have become a characteristic of IBC.

Facility and Support for Local Tertiary Education: Kalyana Mitra Homes

To cater for the welfare and spiritual needs of students studying at the public university level, the Kalyana Mitra (KM) Homes are set up near to the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and the Private Tunku Abdul Rahman College (TARC) on Penang Island. At present, there are about 11 varsity students and working class Buddhist fellows staying at both USM and TARC KM Homes. Both KMH hold their respective weekly activities besides taking part and supporting all the major events organized by Than Hsiang Temple.

The Strong and Healthy To Serve: Youth Fellowship Activities

Youths are our future. Investment in upgrading their moral and leadership qualities is of prime importance to enable them to guide and lead future generations. Besides receiving good Buddhist education and training, the Than Hsiang Youth Group also organizes various activities which comprised of members fellowship gatherings, cultivation, outing and special celebrations such as Parents Day, and Mid-Autumn festival. The monthly events run by the group include Buddhist hymns sharing sessions and monthly birthday parties for the senior citizens of Wan Ching Yuen. The Youth Group also participates enthusiastically and supports

all activities and festivities of Than Hsiang Temple. The Youth Group and Sunday Dharma School co-organize yearly the Teenager and Children Camps during the school holidays. All these activities and events seek to enhance their leadership skills and promote fellowship to secure the fraternity bond among the youth members with the other members of the Temple.

The Strong and Healthy To Serve: Than Hsiang Mitra Welfare Association

To promote the Bodhisattva Ideal of selfless service, the Than Hsiang Mitra Welfare Association was set up to promote welfare work through its Mitra Line Counselling, Social Education Group and Mitra Welfare Group. Mitra Line was first established in 1990 to provide telephone counselling hotline services. It assists, guides and cares for those who are emotionally lost and confused. Mitraline also provides face to face counselling, group counselling and e-mail counselling services. The counselling section yearly organises a series of training programs to attract and enlist new counselling volunteers and to enhance and upgrade the existing counsellors.

The Social Education Group actively organises public talks, film-shows, Intimate Relationship Workshops, group-reading, sharing and workshops to create awareness on positive mental health. Through its belief that the family is the core unit of society, the social education group holds Pre-Marital Counseling Workshops in guiding couples towards establishing blissful and happy families and also the 10-month workshop on “Cultivate Loving Family” which received overwhelming response. In addition, the Centre gives forums and talks to schools and other organisations on various social issues.

The Mitra Welfare Group visits and gives monetary contributions and emotional support to the Old folks Home & Infirmary, Children Handicap Home and the poor. The Mitra Welfare Group also provides hair-cutting services to the senior residents of Than Hsiang's Wan Ching Yuan Centre and other old folks in other homes on a monthly basis. The Mitra Line and Welfare Group have for the past 30 years been energetically providing empathic counselling and social welfare support to the emotionally disheartened and socially disadvantaged members of society respectively.

The Strong and Healthy To Serve: Metta Mobile Free Clinic

The Metta Mobile Free Clinic was established in 1988 with the mission to make traditional Chinese medical services available to all patients from the middle and low-income families of various ethnic groups regardless of their religious beliefs. The Metta Mobile Free Clinic has become an icon in fourteen areas of Penang and has served many thousands during its decade long history of service. Since its inception, the total number of consultations has reached 23,000 and is rising. This has incurred medical and transportation expenses up to RM200,000 per year. The medical services, medications, material, and supplies are all provided free of charge, income being generated solely through individual and organisational donations. A small group of dedicated staff co-ordinates the Clinic's services with the help of volunteers, who donate their precious time and effort to provide medical and administrative services necessary to keep the Clinic in operation.

Spiritual Cultivation

In the service to others one must not forget to serve oneself through one's own spiritual cultivation. Than Hsiang Temple's spiritual philosophy and cultivation is based on the Bodhisattva's Path of accumulation of wisdom and merit. The practice is Amitabha Pure Land School. Amitabha Sutra Chanting Session is held every Saturday and the Eighty-Eight Buddhas Great Repentance Ceremony held on every 1st and 15th of the lunar month. Eight Precepts Cultivation is held monthly. The Filial Piety Dharma Assembly, Three-Day Amitabha Recitation Cultivation and Seven-Day Amitabha Recitation Retreat are also organised annually. The spiritual culture is one of love and compassion with everyone having the potential to realise Buddhahood and thus everyone is acknowledged as a Bodhisattva.

Than Hsiang has recently built the Xiang Yun Jing Yuan Retreat Centre which is a two-storey building located on a two-acre land in Jawi, Seberang Perai Selatan. It will be actively engaged in promoting Buddhist cultivation, education and welfare programmes for the benefit of the public on the mainland.

Than Hsiang Vegetarian Canteen and Restaurant

Than Hsiang promotes vegetarianism in line with the spiritual practice of observance of first precept of non-killing. The Vegetarian Food Service started off with a canteen catering to a small, but regular, clientele and the Restaurant was added later. Now Than Hsiang Vegetarian Food Service provides an array of vegetarian food and includes catering services, sale of organic and chemical free food products, and in-house food services in the canteen and restaurant. The primary aim of Than Hsiang Vegetarian Food Service is to encourage vegetarianism which promotes compassion towards animals. The vegetarian food is prepared by expert vegetarian chefs and a hoard of devoted volunteers in the hygienic kitchen in accordance to the Ministry of Health requirements. The daily vegetarian food is offered on donation basis.

Preservation of Chinese Culture and Traditions

To preserve and promote the Chinese traditional cultural festivals, the temple organises and celebrates these events annually with a strong taste of Buddhist flavour. A few highlights are the annual reunion dinner and long service appreciation night; The Ulambana during the 7th lunar month or Hungry Ghost Festival; and the distribution of Wisdom and Merit mooncakes during the Lantern Festival in the eighth lunar month. In conjunction with these eventful festivities, regular Dharma Talks and Seminars are held to enhance Buddhist knowledge and cultivation.

The Aged and Sick to be Cared For: Than Hsiang Wan Ching Yuan Old Folks Welfare Home

The old and infirm need a place to reside and to spend their final years in peace and contentment. Thus the Wan Ching Yuen Old Folks Welfare Home was established in 1995 with the aim to provide quality care and a comfortable home for the lonely and sick elderly folks. Daily chanting and spiritual counselling and guidance from the monastics of Than Hsiang Temple enable the old folks to acquire peace of mind in preparation for their final journey to Amitabha Pureland. The four homes in Than Hsiang Temple, Sg Ara, Sungai Petani and Petaling Jaya collectively serves over 100 senior citizens. At the Than Hsiang

Temple main home, 90% of the residents are wheelchair bound or bed ridden. Support and services provided by the other departments of Than Hsiang in terms of birthday and festive celebrations, hair cut services and entertainment contributes to the joy and meaningful existence of the old folks. To further expand the care for the elderly, Venerable Wei Wu has plans to build a full facility senior citizens complex in the near future.

The Departed to Find Spiritual Destination

Death, the end of this worldly life is a significant event to the Chinese who are still holding onto traditional views and beliefs. The question of where to house the dead is of paramount importance. To cater for this need Than Hsiang Temple has built the San Sheng Dian Columbarium. The ground and first floor of the San Sheng Dian is divided into an open hall with special room niches. Construction was fully completed at the end of 2012 and a Purification Ceremony was held on March 7th, 2013 which signifies its official commencement. The tradition of ancestral worship which translates as filial piety to the deceased parents is preserved through the Ancestral tablets at both sides of early Da Yuan Dian. Due to the high demand from the public, Than Hsiang Temple expanded its Da Yuan Dian into another three smaller spaces where different statues of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva are enshrined and the ancestral tablets are provided to the public. Daily prayers for the departed at 10a.m. and a special Prayer (Pufo) for the Deceased are offered every 7 weeks by the Sangha members.

Preservation of Ancestor Worship through Modern Technology

Beginning 1st of April 2012, Than Hsiang Temple commenced its inaugural application of digital tablets instead of the traditional paper tablets. Digital tablets are offered on donation basis during Wesak Day celebrations and Filial Piety Dharma Assembly and the traditional practice of burning paper tablets is discarded. At the end of the Dharma Assembly, with modern technology all the digital tablets are transformed into lotuses and ascend towards Amitabha Buddha's welcoming hands as a symbol of ascension to Amitabha Pure Land. In practice, Than Hsiang Temple advocates digital tablets passionately with the aim of

protecting the environment while still preserving the traditional ritual of ancestor worship with its significance and importance.

Conclusion

The success of Than Hsiang is dependent on various factors notwithstanding the dynamic and visionary leadership of its founder Venerable Wei Wu, the dedicated and committed support of the monastic community, the tireless and selfless contribution of the members, the devotees and staff. Everyone of the big Than Hsiang Family plays a significant role in contributing to its success and progress. Looking at it from the Buddhist principle of dependent origination and interconnectedness of all life, the success of Than Hsiang also signifies the spiritual progress of each and every member in the accumulation of wisdom and merit as they journey through life and the fulfillment of the Bodhisattva Ideal. Thus we see that Than Hsiang Temple truly fulfils its educational, social, cultural, and spiritual role and responsibilities and truly caters for every stage and every aspect of human development as one journey from the womb to the tomb.

References

All the information in this paper is accessed from the following websites in the month of June 2015.

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