

**STUDIES ON
HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM ❶**

Foundational Thoughts
人間佛教論文選要

Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism, Taiwan
and
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Establishing a Humanistic Pure Land



Venerable Tzu Hang
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Venerable Tzu Hang was born in the Jianning district of Fujian province. He learned Chan meditation, the sūtras, and Pure Land practice from Yuan Ying, Dixian, and Du'e respectively. In 1933, he established the Chinese Buddhist Association in Myanmar, and took the opportunity to propagate the Dharma in Southeast Asia. In 1948, he was invited to Taiwan to establish a Buddhist college, and in the following year built the Maitreya Inner Hall on Xiufeng Mountain with the support and contributions of Bhikṣuṇī Daxin and Bhikṣuṇī Xuanguang of Jingxiu Chan Monastery in Xizhi. It attracted a large number of student-monks both from the Chinese mainland and from Taiwan. It became the center of Buddhist teaching in Taiwan at that time. After passing away, the body of Tzu Hang did not decay, thereby becoming Buddhism's first full body relic in Taiwan.

What is a Pure Land? It is a wonderful land of purity and dignity. More precisely, it is an excellent society, or an elegant world. From our study of the sūtras, we are aware that there is an Amitābha Buddha teaching the Dharma to sentient beings in the Western Pure Land, ten trillion buddha lands away from our saḥā world. It is a majestic place of treasures and magnificence, where people lead unparalleled lives, happy and carefree. The Buddha's teachings have allowed us to recognize that this is undoubtedly true. However, we have never heard of a humanistic Pure Land. Just look around: the negativities around us portray an image of misery. Everywhere we turn, we find fraud, hypocrisy, cruelty, and conflict... wars and crises are ever-present. We are perpetually struggling and gasping for air in a sea of suffering. Where can one find a peaceful Pure Land? Is rallying for the creation of a humanistic Pure Land simply a ludicrous and unattainable dream? It is precisely why I would like to discuss the topic of a humanistic Pure Land to alleviate human suffering and compensate our shortcomings.

We must first understand that the Pure Land is neither formed without human effort nor made by a god. It is ultimately made possible by mankind. Taking the brilliant and dignified Western Pure Land as an example, it was successfully formed through the combined merits of the forty-eight great vows of Amitābha Buddha and the chanting of the Buddha's name by the sentient beings. The saying, "When the mind is pure, the land is pure" tells us that everyone has the fundamental ability to create a Pure Land, and it can be accomplished if we are strongly determined to do so. How then can we build a humanistic Pure Land? It requires nothing other than the following five fundamental conditions.

1. No Killing Without Due Reason

Killing without due reason is the main cause of world wars. If you don't believe it, then consider this: if you were to threaten my life and I were to retaliate—both are based on no valid reason—we must understand that this exchange of violence would spill blood and fill the place with the foul smell of death. What kind of world would this be? It would virtually be the realm of the asuras, filled with anger and violence. How could we call our world a civilized human realm in this case? Therefore, killing without due reason must be avoided at all costs. However, can we actually avoid all killing? The saying "going too far is as bad as not going far enough" tells us that totally eliminating

killing is not practical in our mundane world. Before we fully realize a humanistic Pure Land, we must understand human behavior will continue to be a mix of both the good and the bad before a Pure Land is achieved. In the view to eradicate lawlessness and serve as a warning to others, we might still turn to legal redress, such as capital punishment, as a last resort in dealing with the worst of criminals. If we can eliminate killing without due reason, past suspicions and hatred will be resolved, and harmonious and close relationships form naturally.

Further extending the scope of this benevolent love, since we are the wisest of beings, we should go beyond not killing each other without due reason and should not willfully harm even the smallest of insects. There is a saying: “Heaven and earth have the virtue of cherishing life.”¹ All beings may differ in their form and size, but yet their fear of death is the same. We should have great compassion based on sameness in essence,² always loving and caring for all, so that their fragile lives may enjoy safety and protection. This is because the practice of protecting life and not killing lays the foundation for thoroughly establishing world peace and building a humanistic Pure Land. There is yet another saying that goes: “If you wish to understand the cruelty of war, just listen to the midnight wailings from the slaughterhouse.”³ For killers who care not about life and kill without due reason, can they afford to not seriously reflect on their actions given the karmic principle so vividly described here? The blissful humanistic Pure Land has to be established upon the human spirit of compassion and universal love, and that is why the first condition is not to kill without due reason.

2. No Improper Gains

Whether it is a salary for teaching, wages for labor, pay for soldiering, or a devotees’ offerings for teaching the Dharma, all these material goods are obtained in exchange for our skills and effort. Since all of these are the outcome of our hard work and are legally obtained, we accept them with a clear conscience. In contrast, we could have taken them through improper means, without effort nor given to us, or perhaps even through trickery, robbery, or by force. Such actions are deviant behaviors which benefit ourselves at the expense of others and compromise our moral integrity. In fact, this type of theft is epitomized by the ambitious warlord who conquers the territory of others. All the disputes

and unrest in our world are caused by such shameless acts of taking through improper means. Therefore, in order to build a humanistic Pure Land, we have to purge our mind of desires and ambitions, and rid ourselves of greed, which knows no bounds. We should furthermore promote and practice charitable works to benefit humankind. If everyone can mutually benefit one another, then all can enjoy the fruits of “contentment which brings eternal happiness.”⁴ At that time, there would naturally not be any theft, and we would smoothly progress towards a peaceful and happy humanistic Pure Land.

3. No Improper Sexual Relationships

Everyone is born from their parents, and so we can say that our parents are the source of our lives. For our country and people to prosper and to carry on the ancestral lineage, the formal marriage between man and wife continues to be a matter of course from the perspective of worldly affairs. Having improper sexual relationships goes contrary to etiquette and is shameless immoral behavior befitting of animals. Who does not have a mother, aunt, or sister? If we were to engage in improper sexual relationships, throwing ethics and shame to the wind, wouldn't we be living in the animal kingdom? The saying “lewdness is the worst of all sins”⁵ cautions us. To build a humanistic Pure Land, such sexual misconduct, which goes contrary to etiquette, has to be stopped and replaced with proper relationships and reduced desire. If we were to regard other women as our mothers or sisters, then this chaotic world of unspeakable obscenity will naturally turn into a purified land.

4. No Speaking Without Restraint

Words are the expression of our mental state. Appropriate words should be said at appropriate moments, and we should absolutely refrain from speaking without restraint and using words which are not beneficial. Examples of these are harsh words, misleading the public with heresy, sowing discord, deceptive lies, flowery speech, sarcasm, etc. None of these are beneficial. They are damaging to relationships and benefit neither oneself nor others. In order to promote cohesive and warm relationships among people, we must adhere to the rule of not speaking without restraint and practice loving and compassionate

speech. The ancients said: “One word can cause the state to prosper; one word can cause it to perish,”⁶ and “What has been said cannot be unsaid.”⁷ This tells us the importance of not speaking without restraint. If everyone can speak and behave with integrity and conscience, a humanistic Pure Land will naturally ensue.

5. No Eating and Drinking Without Restraint

Eating and drinking is essential to our lives, but we should limit ourselves to items required for our daily sustenance and not desire after products that are not beneficial to our physical and mental wellbeing. We should steer clear of intoxicating and stimulating items like cigarettes, alcohol, opium, and morphine. If consumed without restraint, they not only affect our health and depress our mental state but lead to bankruptcy and utter failure. A humanistic Pure Land has to be collectively built by people with vitality and moral integrity, therefore intoxicants have to be avoided at all costs. Hence, not eating and drinking without restraint is also one of the fundamental requirements of establishing a humanistic Pure Land.

The Buddha taught the Dharma for forty-nine years and discussed the sūtras in more than three hundred meetings, but the essence of the Buddha’s teachings can be summarized into a delineation of wholesomeness and unwholesomeness. Its aim is to guide the living towards eliminating the unwholesome and cultivating the wholesome, so as to achieve a noble and perfect character. The Five Precepts mentioned above act as a moral compass and is the sole foundation for establishing a humanistic Pure Land. Readers should be aware that the Five Precepts are not unique to Buddhism; they are also the common aim of every country’s political and legal system. The only difference between them is that they are presented differently because their points of view are not the same.

The unrest in the world and disorder in society are due to killing without due reason and improper gains. In order to establish a humanistic Pure Land, we have to start with the five precepts. If one can practice the five precepts, one gains peace for him or herself. This is true for a family, village, town, county, province, or nation. If all the nations in the world can practice the five precepts, then a humanistic Pure Land will soon be realized.

Establishing a Humanistic Pure Land

Notes

- 1 「天地有好生之德」-Ed.
- 2 同體大悲 -Ed.
- 3 「欲知世上刀兵劫，但聽屠門半夜聲」-Ed.
- 4 知足常樂 -Ed.
- 5 「萬惡淫為首」-Ed.
- 6 「一言可以興邦，一言可以喪邦」-Ed.
- 7 「一言既出，駟馬難追」-Ed.