

**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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# My Understanding of Humanistic Buddhism



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Born in the Jiangdu district of Jiangsu province, **Venerable Master Hsing Yun** studied with major monasteries of the Chan, Pure Land, and Vinaya traditions at locations such as Jinshan, Jiaoshan, and Qixia. Having relocated to Taiwan in the spring of 1949, the Venerable Master then founded the Yilan Buddhist Chanting Association in 1953, which formed the foundation of his Dharma propagation career. In 1967, Venerable Master Hsing Yun founded Fo Guang Shan in the spirit of Humanistic Buddhism and has since committed himself to promoting Buddhist education, culture, charity, and propagation of the Dharma. He has set up nearly 300 Fo Guang Shan branches worldwide. Furthermore, he also founded many art galleries, libraries, publishing houses, bookstores, Cloud and Water Mobile Clinics, Buddhist colleges, and established institutes of higher learning such as the University of the West (formerly Hsi Lai University), Fo Guang University, Nanhua University, Nan Tien Institute, and Guang Ming College. After 1970, the Venerable Master established Da Ci Children's Home and Jen-Ai Senior Citizen's Home to shelter needy children and the elderly, and also helped to provide emergency relief and other services to benefit society. In 1977, he established The Fo Guang Tripitaka Editorial Committee, which compiled the *Fo Guang Buddhist Canon* and the *Fo Guang Dictionary of Buddhism*. Venerable Master Hsing Yun has published voluminously throughout his Dharma propagation career. His disciples compiled the Venerable Master's works up to 2016, and published the *Complete Works of Venerable Master Hsing Yun* in 2017, which has 365 volumes.

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As far as Humanistic Buddhism has developed, many queries about this teaching exist and await clarification. I hereby list a few of them:

1. Humanistic Buddhism is a secular and prosaic tradition taught only for the Human Vehicle, and does not lead to supreme Buddhahood.
2. Humanistic Buddhism only focuses on mundane activities that do not bear much relevance to the practice of the Dharma.
3. Humanistic Buddhism does not involve spiritual cultivation, and only focuses on personal relationships and dealing with matters irrelevant to the Buddhist practices of transcendence, spiritual growth, and attainment of Buddhahood.
4. Humanistic Buddhism is aimed at lay Buddhists, and does not bear sacredness pertained to the monastic ways of living, austerity or enlightenment.
5. What is the heritage of Humanistic Buddhism? Who of this tradition has achieved spiritual attainment? Since there are no clear answers, the propagation of Humanistic Buddhism has thus become a challenge.
6. Insufficient promotion and the absence of a clear theoretical system of Humanistic Buddhism have added to the challenge for people to thoroughly understand it, especially when only understood or encountered through small segments, one-sided views, and bereft a system.
7. Humanistic Buddhism is not yet generally recognized as a core concept of Buddhism. Without general support, it is not easy for the public to accept it solely based on the effort of any single tradition or organization.
8. Humanistic Buddhism does not involve a path to liberation, nor leads one to the state of attainment, therefore not easily accepted by traditional Buddhists.

Besides the above issues of concern regarding Humanistic Buddhism, others include: the relation between modern and traditional Buddhism, monastic and lay Buddhists, social seclusion and participation, primitive and contemporary forms of Buddhism, spiritual cultivation and activities. It can be said that general acceptance of Humanistic Buddhism still needs to be enhanced.

There was a time when Buddhists retreated to an other-worldly lifestyle, focusing solely on cultivation of the self. This caused Buddhism's this-worldly spirit to disappear. They retreated in isolation into mountain forests, no longer concerned with helping the people. Their focus shifted to empty metaphysical talks and abandoned the development of Buddhist undertakings. They simply spoke of the Dharma, and assumed a passive mindset. This was a complete regression from proactive Buddhism, namely the search for the Truth and to benefit all beings. In my journey to restore the original and genuine meaning of Humanistic Buddhism, I present the following elaborations on its meanings and content:

1. Humanistic Buddhism inspires us to elevate and have faith in ourselves; because this self embodies the wisdom and virtue of the Buddha. Thus we must realize that we are all buddhas and be proud to say that "I am a buddha." Such is the spirit of Humanistic Buddhism. Instead of placing our fate in the hands of divine entities, we should take responsibility for our own lives. The saying in the *Āgamas*, "Rely on the self, rely on the Dharma, rely on nothing else," is a rendition of the faith of Humanistic Buddhism.
2. The spirit of Humanistic Buddhism encourages us to blend in with others instead of seeing the self and others as separate beings on opposite stances. All beings are connected as one, and everything in this world is related to us. We believe that the Truths of Dependent Origination and the Middle Path, as realized by the Buddha, are in fact the Truths taught in Humanistic Buddhism. The inheritance of belief in these Truths symbolizes the faith of Humanistic Buddhism.
3. Faith can be complex and diverse, yet everything becomes simple in Humanistic Buddhism based on the belief that our buddha-nature can make anything possible. While the levels and categories of faith may vary, the teachings of

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all faiths can be harmonized by the concept of Humanistic Buddhism, which embraces all, and serves as a faith for humanity as a whole.

4. Humanistic Buddhism is a faith in an eternal life. While it is said in the Bible: “He who believes has eternal life,” the truth is, he who does not believe also has eternal life. Life is like the arms of a clock that move in a cyclical direction. If it were linear, then it would mean that life moves from the point of birth to the point of death, and then ends. On the other hand, in a cyclical manner, once the arms of a clock pass twelve, it will begin anew again and again without end. Life can also be compared to the four seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter; the cycle of formation, existence, disintegration, emptiness; the mental process of arising, abiding, change, and cessation; and cycle of old age, sickness, death, and rebirth. Since birth follows death, there will be a future, and there will be hope.

Therefore, I believe that the Humanistic Buddhist view on rebirth offers an infinite future. From now on, the Six Realms of Rebirth are less likely to be mentioned in Humanistic Buddhism. The belief that every being is a buddha deems it unnecessary to draw a clear line between sacred and ordinary beings if rebirth occurs within all ten realms. This is what Humanistic Buddhism advocates.

5. It is true to say that everyone has buddha-nature. Like a seed which, when presented with the right conditions, will sprout and grow. Unfortunately, without the necessary nutrients, these barren seeds are then known as *icchantika*—one without the potential of attaining Buddhahood. As the theories of natural selection and survival of the fittest both hold, the removal of an unfit minority is also part of the process. Generally speaking, life is eternal only with a few exceptions; that is to say, in terms of time, life never dies. In terms of evolution, it is natural for certain beings to eclipse others. This is entirely natural.
6. While it is said that everyone has the buddha-nature, faith nevertheless differs amongst individuals. For example, differences in depth, level of transcendence, elevation, and breadth of one’s faith. In fact, though faith is sacred, the levels

of devotion, transcendence, and potential still differ. Just as the functions of different brands of microphones vary, it is also natural for some to fall behind in energy and devotion to faith. This is likewise altogether normal.

7. We believe that humanity can be better, bigger, and more transcending. Even the so-called arhat, bodhisattva, and the buddha are only conventional names. Human nature is extremely diverse, and life can be limitless, whilst faith has differing levels. In Humanistic Buddhism, it is believed that faith is what determines our future destinations; faith is also what leads us to the state of eternity, one that frees us from birth and death.
8. Human society can be quite complex. While each human is an individual, they also depend on the conditions of the communities to exist, just as everything in this universe depends on one another to survive. However, while there is no difference between the sacred and ordinary, ordinary beings nevertheless still possess a sense of discrimination.

As much as world peace is a common ideal, the possibility of realizing it in the human world is minimal, because the worlds of Buddha and Māra will always be regarded as separate. Therefore, rather than expecting others to achieve peace, we should depend on ourselves to do so. While it is said that external peace may never be achieved, we can still achieve inner peace. Just as Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva has vowed to never attain Buddhahood until hells are emptied, though hells may never be empty, the power of Kṣitigarbha's vow has already emptied the hells, and he will eventually attain Buddhahood.

9. While lives are regarded as individual beings, they are nevertheless interconnected as one. In the faith of Humanistic Buddhism, there are no dualities of time and space or concerns of birth and death. From a passive perspective, what we seek is freedom from fear, delusion, depravity, and distress. From a proactive perspective, life can be happier, more tranquil, more peaceful, more harmonious, and more liberated. In the end, the faith of Humanistic Buddhism helps pursue a life lived in joy, in boundless space and time, as well as within unlimited connections and achievements.

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10. The ultimate goal of Humanistic Buddhism does not inherently reside in the attainment of Buddhahood. Since the Buddha declared that everyone possesses buddha-nature, what we need to do now is “to awaken.” Awaken to the fact that we can harmonize ourselves with the rest of the world. Humanistic Buddhism advocates that everything in this world is part of the self. Concurrently, everything in this world is without a self. If the self can be harmonized with the dharma realms, it would also mean that the self is equal and coexists with all beings within the Ten Dharma Realms.
11. The faith of Humanistic Buddhism is simple and undivided. It is freedom from birth and death, and a state of existence that neither arises nor ceases. The faith of Humanistic Buddhism inspires one to pursue a life and spiritual state of perfection, eternity, awakening, liberation, and purification. It allows one to transcend all living beings.
12. Humanistic Buddhism aims to achieve a state of mind that is free from worries, fears, and delusions. Through the virtues of kindness, honesty, and compassion, we shall be able to take life onto an even higher level that is free from doubts, fear of death, distress, and instead follow our faith and the natural process of life. Within this higher state, we are not at the mercy of divine entities; instead, we depend on ourselves to reach our destinations.

Be it present or future lives, or even that disrememberment in-between lives, confusion about birth and death, or disbelief in the possibility of liberation, none of these will ever prevail in an awakened mind. We also believe that the state of enlightenment is the uncovering of our own original face, that is, the true Thusness of buddha-nature. This so happens to be the sacredness of Humanistic Buddhism. In terms of the three great asamkya-kalpas, the Eastern Pure Land, and Western Pure Land, an awakened mind will help us realize that these are nothing but expedient means. Liberation and perfection of the world will eventually come true under the blessings of the Buddha.

13. Humanistic Buddhism believes that we can unify ourselves with others. Just as the saying, “the mind, the Buddha, and all living beings are no different from

one another,” both self and time are infinite, both self and space are boundless; furthermore, both self and countless living beings coexist as one.

14. Liberation can be rightly attained within the cycle of rebirth. Rebirth should not be distinguished by suffering caused within it and joy attained outside of it, because the cycle is also a world within itself in which elevation and freedom can be achieved. Now, where exactly is the cycle of rebirth? It is inside the great void. The concept of a harmonized dharma realm is omnipresent. One is all, and all is one. In other words, it can be explained by the idea: “With wisdom, one does not abide in birth and death; with compassion, one does not abide in nirvāṇa.” This is the world of Humanistic Buddhism.
15. Upon the moment of awakening, one will discover prajñā wisdom to guide oneself through life. Like an enlightened traveler, one will be able to travel the world with infinite energy. Once awakened, one will realize that the dualities of good and bad, right and wrong, and virtue and evil no longer matter. Furthermore, one will no longer be influenced by the Five Desires and Six Sense Fields.<sup>1</sup> Is this not a state of liberation?
16. The value of faith lies in broadening one’s horizons, elevating oneself, liberating oneself, and harmonizing self and the world. I believe that these ultimate goals of Humanistic Buddhism can only be accomplished by self-effort. “Be your own mentor.” This is what being a buddha is about.
17. No religions in this world, not even Humanistic Buddhism, can solve people’s problems for them. This world is comprised of half Buddha and half Māra. One principle the Buddha taught us is that even if he may show you the way by which he attained liberation, he nevertheless cannot liberate you from your own karma. The saying, “We all stand before God’s judgment” leaves much to be questioned. Where will this judgment take place? In Buddhism, we stand before our own judgment, no one else’s. We are the only ones who will be facing our own karma.

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18. Humanistic Buddhism as a faith can never be too vast, too profound, or too considerable, for it embodies all dharmas. It is about self-purification, self-management, and self-education. The purpose of collective cultivation is to maintain mutual respect of people's conducts, shared values, equal distribution of benefits, harmonious social coexistence, loving and kind speech, as well as the mental joy of spiritual attainment. This concept of collective harmony introduced by the Buddha, when he first established the monastic community, is truly what Humanistic Buddhism advocates today.
19. Humanistic Buddhism is a faith that encourages us to have self-recognition. No matter what others may say, my chosen faith is supreme and unsurpassed. The depth of faith may vary like the different stages of schooling: kindergarten, primary, secondary, and tertiary school; yet all of us are still known as students. Just because I am still in kindergarten does not mean that I lack potential, or just because you are pursuing a doctorate degree does not make you any different since we are all in the process of learning. On the journey of faith, we can each be great in our own ways.
20. Life is eternal and never dies; by stating this I am referring to the True Thusness of buddha-nature, which bears sacredness, which is Humanistic Buddhism. When human beings aspire to broaden and expand transcendental lives, purify and sublimate their faith, what they practice so happens to be Humanistic Buddhism.

Notes

- 1 The Five Desires refer to human desires for: wealth, sensual pleasure, fame, food, and sleep. The Six Sense fields refer to the objects of the six sense faculties: form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and concepts. -Ed.