

**STUDIES ON  
HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM ❶**

Foundational Thoughts  
人間佛教論文選要

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# The Historic Position of Humanistic Buddhism from the Viewpoint of the Process of Sinicization of Buddhism



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## **1. How Should We Regard Early Buddhism?**

Buddhism was founded by Śākyamuni Buddha, and is both a religion and a philosophy. As a religion, Buddhism has a unique belief system, organizational structure, and way of embodying belief through practice (including religious services). Compared to other religions, Buddhism has distinctive characteristics.

With the exception of Buddhism, religions believe in an almighty god who is the center of their faith and doctrine. This god is the focus of their worship, and the purpose of their faith is salvation from sin. In contrast, Buddhism has an underlying doctrine and practice of “non-self.” This doctrine rejects the existence of any extrinsic god. It also denies the presence of an intrinsic soul. Therefore, the purpose of its belief is not to receive deliverance from sin, but rather to realize liberation from life’s pain and hardship.

Salvation relies on “dependence,” whereas liberation relies on “self.” From the perspective of self-liberation, Buddhist teachings in their entirety form a very complex philosophical system. Through practice of the doctrine, the devotees have transformed it into way of life.

The system of belief in Buddhism embodies Śākyamuni Buddha’s holistic insight into the ultimate truth about the universe, society, and life. “Emptiness” relates to the essence of the phenomenological world based on *prajñā* contemplation. “Dependent Origination” is a systematic analysis of the structure of “existence.” Once the phenomenon of “existence” is demonstrated by a certain relationship, it can be shown that our “self” is a dependent entity. “Existence” and its counterpart “void” co-exist in all phenomenon that are inherent in the character of “existence.” Each phenomenon (and all the factors that comprise it) has within itself a negation of its own existence. The “existence” of all objects goes through a continual negation of its existence. This is “emptiness.” Through a timeless and unstoppable process of interrogation of existence, the true nature of “emptiness” will be revealed. Therefore, all things are impermanent, and all phenomenon are without intrinsic nature. The process of “existence” is in fact the realization of “emptiness.” For only “emptiness” can illustrate the ultimate purpose of all things’ “existence.” Therefore “emptiness leads to truth.”

Therefore, according to the vocabulary of Buddhism, “existence” is simply a series of phenomenon appearing in space-time. If all things can be explained in this manner,

it follows that our lives can also be similarly explained. “Emptiness” in our lives is the origin of our suffering. If there is no understanding of the “emptiness” of all things in life, then we can only perceive intermittent realization without full awareness of the truth. Our lives will then descend into obscurity and ignorance. This suffering is continuous and endless. This is known as *samsāra*.

*Samsāra* is a state of life in endless, continuous, and repeated depravity and deterioration. Essentially this is life’s suffering. By realizing the quintessence of “emptiness” in all phenomenon in this world and understanding the notion of “no self” in our life, we can surmount the limitation of “self.” This will lead to the practice and experience of “emptiness” in our lives, which leads to a way to transcend suffering into a state of well-being and happiness. The overcoming of suffering and *samsāra* leads to the realization of an inherent carefree state in our lives, a state of “liberation.” Based on the above, we see that Buddhism utilizes objective and solemn investigative observation of life’s suffering as a basis, and eradication of this suffering as its ultimate goal. It used “suffering” to reveal a prerequisite path to carefree happiness.

Śākyamuni Buddha was not only concerned with the suffering of people, but of all life forms (all sentient beings). The idea of *samsāra* extending to all beings is a manifestation of the concept of equality for all. All living beings make up the Six Realms. The space where the Six Realms is located constitute the Three Realms. All sentient beings within the Three Realms suffer. Therefore, to reach this state of liberation, we must transcend both the Six Realms and Three Realms. Transcending these realms is the Buddha realm, “the other shore.”

According to early Buddhism, the free and blissful happiness that liberation brings is, after all, attributable to sentient beings transcending this shore and reaching “the other shore.” Therefore, “the other shore” becomes the fundamental goal of Buddhism. The revelation of “the other shore” as the fundamental goal and vision of Buddhism shows its transcendental nature as a religion. Otherwise, it might only be regarded as another philosophy.

## **2. Understanding the Sinicization of Buddhism**

The transcendental nature of “the other shore” is unfamiliar to the inherent character of Chinese culture. Since Buddhism was introduced to China, this form of religion with

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a profound and exotic flavor has never stopped colliding, interacting, exchanging, and integrating with traditional Chinese culture. It eventually became an integral part of Chinese culture.

From the first century to the end of the sixth century, the interaction between traditional Chinese culture, exemplified by Confucianism and Daoism, and Buddhism was one of the most magnificent and moving scenes in the history of Chinese culture. The value of the Buddhist concept of “the other shore,” which provides an original insight into the truth of life and the universe, infuses a completely new dimension into the traditional Chinese view of the existence and value of life. However, the transcendental connotation of the other shore was eventually transformed by the idea of transcendence inherent in Chinese culture. The value of the other shore was ultimately subsumed by the life on this shore. This world, the transcendental world, and the Six Realms were eventually unified within “the middle way.” The unification of the three truths: emptiness, provisional existence, and the middle is used to redefine the true nature existence of all dharmas. Emptiness refers to all dharmas lacking of self-nature; provisional existence indicates that all phenomena only temporarily exist; and the middle means neither arising nor ceasing, neither sameness nor difference, neither coming nor going, and neither eternalism nor nihilism.

The great contribution of Zhiyi was to create a great realm by merging the world and the transcendental world, sentient beings and the Buddha realm, this shore and the other shore, as well as the transcendent and the intrinsic. Achieving the religious fundamental goal of liberation was no longer only a found on the other shore but could be attained at the present moment on this shore. This is because the mind is the root of both delusion and enlightenment, and also so as the basis of ignorance and wisdom. The mind as true reality exists both intrinsic and transcendental. The inner transcendental interpretation of the mind eliminates the Buddhist concept of crossing to the other shore. Liberation is no longer necessarily sought in another realm but can be realized by the mind in the present moment.

The great harmonization of the theoretical system in the Tiantai School symbolizes the completion of the sinicization of Buddhism. The fundamental liberation theory of the Tiantai School dispels the transcendence of the other shore and confirms the essence of liberation is within the mind of sentient beings. Therefore, the state of liberation means

that the mind returns to its true natural state, which is absolutely free from all attachment to worldly phenomena.

The subsequent history of Chinese Buddhism has shown that this liberation path of the mind pioneered by the Tiantai School was based on mind as the source of ignorance and enlightenment, and the state of liberation comes when the mind is clarified. This has become the main teaching followed by Chinese Buddhism. By the time of the development of Chan Buddhism, the transcendence of the mind had gained unprecedented prominence and the transcendence of the other shore had almost completely faded away by an intuitive view of “understanding one’s mind and seeing one’s intrinsic nature.”

It is the “introversion of liberation” that constitutes the distinctive feature of Chinese Buddhism. This path of introverted liberation coincides with the ideas in Confucianism and Daoism that the heavenly realm is intrinsic to human nature, and therefore people have an original concept of transcendence within them. In fact, we can even say that the formation of this Buddhist path of introverted liberation was originally the result of the dissolution of the original idea of the Buddhist other shore by Confucianism and Daoism. As the process of intercultural interaction, the introduction of the Buddhist ideological system into China was an implantation of the exotic culture of Buddhism into the context of Chinese culture. During the process of this implantation, a two-way relationship inevitably appeared. On one hand, Buddhism, as an exotic culture that has left its original cultural context, could not completely maintain its pure Indian form while integrating into the new context of Chinese culture. There was a blending and recontextualization as the Buddhist culture adapted to the Chinese culture. At the same time, this process led to Buddhism becoming less foreign. On the other hand, the recontextualization of Buddhism in the context of Chinese culture is the process by which Chinese culture responded to the “significant other” of Buddhism until it was accepted. The inevitable result was change in the overall context of the Chinese culture.

Judging from the track of this historical movement, if the emergence of Chan is taken as a general demarcation, then the history of Buddhism in China before the emergence of Chan appeared mainly as a continuous recontextualization of Buddhism in the context of Chinese culture. In this historical process, the emergence of the Tiantai School was the first complete form of recontextualized Buddhism and created a new context for the subsequent development of Buddhism. The history after the emergence of

Chan Buddhism involved changes in the overall pattern of the Chinese cultural context. For this reason, Buddhism obtained a relatively independent form within this new context.

### **3. Positioning Humanistic Buddhism**

In the historical development of Buddhism in China, “sinicization” was a recontextualization within the Chinese cultural system. As mentioned above, at a deeper structural level, this process of recontextualization inevitably integrated with the original ideas and cultural system of China, especially Confucianism and Daoism. In terms of the adjustments and integration of cultural ideas, ideological values, and spiritual practice, the respective systems of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism were all essentially redeveloped within the historical ideological movements. The “unity of three creeds” that has been advocated since the Five Dynasties is actually these three cultural phenomena borrowing from each other, exchanging ideas with each other, and mutually being a “significant other.”

As far as Buddhism itself is concerned, its recontextualization within the overall pattern of Chinese culture involved an “*epoché*” or even “dissolution” of some of the theoretical elements inherent in Indian Buddhism. I personally feel that the most important element subjected to “*epoché*” is the concept of crossing to the other shore to become a buddha, which has prompted Chinese Buddhism to shift the focus of its core values from the other shore to this world. At the same time, changing the ideal of liberation into one where enlightenment is found intrinsically in the mind. This introverted transformation of liberation and the complete integration of the spirit of the Mahāyāna bodhisattva path are distinctive elements of Chinese Buddhism that have led to a focus on real life and the perfection of the human character as the way to enlightenment and Buddhahood.

Master Taixu’s “teaching in four phrases” states: “We look up the Buddha and take refuge in his perfected character. By perfecting our own humanity, we attain Buddhahood.” This is the most succinct expression and embodiment of human fulfillment and flourishing in this life. The true spirit of Buddhahood is achieved by perfecting the human character. The contemporary example provided by Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s Humanistic Buddhism developed along the internal path of Buddhism’s sinicization. It focuses on real life, the development of an abundant and flourishing life through perfection

of character, and the role of Buddhism in the cultivation of character. The essence of the practice of Humanistic Buddhism is the continuous transformation of the living realm into the ultimate realization of Buddhahood.

The spirit of Humanistic Buddhism promoted by Venerable Master Hsing Yun is undoubtedly in line with Buddhist principles, is consistent with the intrinsic spirit of Chinese culture, and is in agreement the internal logic of Sinicized Buddhism. Therefore, it has become a new stage in the historical development of Sinicized Buddhism.

“Humanistic Buddhism” represents a historical form of Chinese Buddhism unfolding its own history. The completion of the sinicization of Buddhism during the Sui and Tang Dynasties meant that Buddhism in China had reached a relatively independent form. After that, Sinicized Buddhism in China began to develop its own history. The development of Buddhism in ancient Chinese society not only maintained a bit of tension with the native Confucianism and Daoism, but also deeply influenced the overall construction of Chinese thought and culture. As it spread with its unique cultural characteristics to surrounding areas, it made a great contribution to the historical shape of the “Sinosphere.”

Within the context of the fundamental changes in the overall patterns of Chinese culture, Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s contemporary model of Humanistic Buddhism inherits the historical traditions of Chinese Buddhism, integrates Buddhist doctrine, and is deeply involved in the current age. It creatively transformed the way Buddhism was spread in ancient times, allowing Chinese Buddhism to be integrated into the greater pattern of world culture while retaining its distinctive features. In depth and breadth, it has made great contributions toward disseminating Chinese culture to the world. It has pushed Chinese Buddhism to new historical heights. As far as the history of Sinicized Buddhism is concerned, Humanistic Buddhism as practiced by Venerable Master Hsing Yun is a new model for Chinese Buddhism and a new form that meets the needs of its time.

In terms of its form and expression, the contemporary practice of Humanistic Buddhism has significant differences from ancient forms, but Buddhism has not lost any of its loving kindness or spirit of relieving suffering and bringing joy to all sentient beings. In practice and in form, the new changes are a skillful means for adapting to the times.

Not only does Buddhism attach importance to “skillful means,” but Chinese culture has also originally valued adjusting institutions to fit the changes and conditions of the

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times. This is also a “skillful means.” For example, the *Book of Rites* states: “Rules of ceremony are the embodied expression of what is right. If an observance stands the test of being judged by the standard of what is right, although it may not have been the way of ancient kings, it may be adopted on the grounds of being right.”<sup>1</sup> In the sense of “skillful means,” Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s contemporary model of Humanistic Buddhism is a new and effective practice that reveals the original intents of Buddha in a unique and contemporary style.

#### Notes

- 1 Translation of this passage comes from 中國哲學書電子化計劃 <https://ctext.org/dictionary.pl?if=gb&id=11500#s10119160>