

ON THE THIS-WORLDLY EMPHASIS OF HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM

Jai Ben-Ray

Feng Chia University

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904), Weber discussed the rationalization of the development of Protestantism in elective affinity to modern capitalism, the first step in the analysis of the influence of religion on modern civilization. In Weber's later years he wrote *The Economic Ethics of the World's Religions*, which further examines the attitudes of different religions towards modern economic life, to highlight the character of "inner-worldly mastery" of Protestantism.

Protestantism, by way of the doctrinal reforms of Calvin's predestination, turned into a religion of the worldly asceticism. For believers, redemption is by the grace of God, but it will appear in the regularity of life and a systematic self-control and wealth accumulation. Therefore, the ethical attitude of inner-worldly mastery has achieved systematic rationalization of the modern world, and has allowed Protestantism to become a promoter of modernization. In contrast, Buddhism is seen in opposition to Protestantism at different levels of redemption. Compared with Protestantism, which is God-centered, ethical, this-worldly, ascetic, and particularistic, Buddhism is universe-centered, superstitious, other-worldly, mystical, and universalistic. These characteristics of Buddhism mean that modern capitalism could not have been born from it, and the Buddhist withdrawal from the world and negative attitude towards life have become the main factors behind the economic backwardness of the Eastern world.

The above proposition has been widely accepted in academia for the last century. Given its traditional emphasis on a world-renouncing approach to life, Buddhism is believed to be unfit for guiding economic development or political reform. Furthermore, Buddhist teachings were long seen as a barrier, a deterrent to the development of modern capitalism, and a modernized society. However, the economic boom the world witnessed in East Asia brought the successful modernization of many Buddhist countries, which suggests that Buddhism may be compatible with capitalism and modernization after all. Furthermore, scholars have long debated the question: Do the economic gains achieved

in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China clash with the ethics and values of Buddhism? In his work *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, Weber discussed how strong family ties and predisposition towards mysticism might have hindered the development of capitalism in China. However, the book's discussion of Buddhism was very limited. Kang Le offered the following reasons.¹

Many Chinese identify themselves as Buddhists; China exceeds any other country in the world in the size of its Buddhist population. However, Weber's writing on the religions of China included Confucianism and Taoism, whereas Buddhism was part of his discussion of the religions of India, along with Hinduism. In Weber's perspective, Chinese Buddhism had deviated too much from the original Buddhism to be considered Buddhism.

To what extent is this a valid observation? Has Buddhism in China deviated too much from Buddhism in its original form? Or rather, is Chinese Buddhism [the product of] the development of Buddhism while having a fundamental impact on local society and culture, in different places and times?

Since its origination in India, Buddhism has found its way to Southeast Asian countries, as well as nations like China, Tibet, and Japan; it has become the most important religion to have influenced human civilization in the last two thousand years. However, in ancient India where Buddhism originated, its presence today as a religion has diminished; Southeast Asia has witnessed the advancement of Theravāda Buddhism; Tibetan Buddhism has also distinguished itself from other lineages; in China, Buddhism has mainly taken shape in the tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which evolved into its own in Japan. With China as the country with the world's largest Buddhist population, naturally, within it, there have been many schools and lineages of Buddhism. There has been significant progress made in China in the construction of Buddhist temples, as well as translating and annotating Buddhist literature. Buddhism has also become the most important religion among Chinese communities worldwide. Nonetheless, sinicized Buddhism is indeed somewhat different from Buddhism in its original form. Scholars often see the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism in China as fundamentally different from original Buddhism or Theravāda Buddhism. Therefore, they would handle Chinese Buddhism and Theravāda Buddhism separately.

Since its introduction from India, it has taken Buddhism a long journey in adapting

to Chinese society. Understandably, it is different from the original Buddhism. Arthur F. Wright (1913-1976) argued that the relation of Chinese culture and Buddhism is neither absorption nor assimilation but of appropriation.² In other words, upon introduction into China, Buddhism underwent significant changes and adjusted to Chinese society; as a result, Buddhism's popularity in China exceeded its popularity within India, where it originated.²

Ran Yunhua posited that Chinese culture was able to incorporate Mahāyāna Buddhism through a process of integration and adaptation. Chinese Buddhism also adopted principles, concepts, and practices that are relevant from Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhist scriptures from India, philosophical paradigms that differ from or contradict each other, as well as meditation techniques of different schools. Ultimately, all these different elements were integrated and reorganized into a new theoretical paradigm. Thus, the original Buddhism from India was able to evolve into the Chinese, and East Asian models of Buddhism.³

According to Professor Lai Yonghai, the Sinicization of Buddhism was mainly a process of Confucianization of Buddhism. The Confucianization manifested in a gradual process of Buddhism adopting a more humanistic focus. This process ultimately led to a Humanistic Buddhism that is represented by Chan Buddhism.

The earliest development of the humanization of Buddhism in Chan Buddhism occurred during the "Sixth Patriarch's Revolution." The Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng stated in the *Platform Sutra* that:

If one seeks to cultivate one's mind,
It can be done anywhere, at home or at a temple.
With an awakened and pure mind,
One's home is the Pure Land.
The Dharma is in the world,
Apart from this world there is no awakening.
Seeking bodhi apart from the world,
Is like looking for a rabbit's horn.

As one of the core principles, the *Platform Sutra* advocates the seeking of liberation within this world, which is the main difference between the Sixth Patriarch and the previous patriarchs, whose focus were mainly on the pursuit of enlightenment through solitary practice.⁴

If Buddhism has undergone Sinicization in China and developed alongside Chinese's unique social values and culture; given these changes, how can one ascertain whether Chinese Buddhism remains true to the original core principles of Buddhism?

Weber pointed out that religious practices, as well as the typical practices of asceticism and meditation, were developed earliest and most consistently in India.⁵ The public often associates Buddhism with asceticism, meditative seclusion, and cultivation for the next life. However, Chinese Buddhism places a strong emphasis on a this-worldly pursuit, distinctive from Buddhism in its original form or Theravāda Buddhism. Now, many argue that China has absorbed the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism and evolved its unique development. However, Mahāyāna Buddhism had its fundamental development when it was in India, and is not exactly the result of Sinicization. Besides, the extent to which Chinese Buddhism adheres to the core principles of Buddhism, and how Buddhism in China shares the lineage of original Buddhism, remain to be explored.

In the book *Hinduism and Buddhism*, Weber stated that Indian society, which is shaped by the caste system, influenced how Hinduism was born and unfolded. Jainism and primitive Buddhism cannot escape these social conditions and were the products of the dominant privileged class. In Weber's view, the key difference between Mahāyāna and Theravāda is not in the doctrine, but in the relative intensity of the Indian tradition in each. "Mahāyāna Buddhism must take into consideration the different political conditions, more so than Theravāda Buddhism." Therefore, according to Weber, Mahāyāna Buddhism is different from Chinese Buddhism and they cannot be treated as equals. Chinese Buddhism can be said to be the result of Mahāyāna Buddhism's intense transformation in response to conditions there, which enabled it to cater to the mindset of Confucian scholars so it would not be ruled out.⁶

Therefore, Buddhism was influenced by Hinduism in India or by Confucianism in China. The Buddhism practiced in today's China is Mahāyāna Buddhism, which differs from original Buddhism. One may argue that it is Buddhism shaped by China, while others believe that it is China that has been changed by Buddhism. Both perspectives

have validity and Sinologists and Indologists do disagree strongly on this matter.

The Weberian school on the sociology of religion, consistent with the [consensus of] the discussion among academics about Buddhism, states that Buddhism emphasizes cultivation for nirvana, as well as asceticism through seclusion. Hence, this school of thought considers practicing monastics as the main inheritors and promoters of Buddhism. To Weber and other Western scholars, they often regarded monastics as representatives of Buddhism and asceticism as the core value of Buddhism. As a result, in their opinion, renunciation from the world represents the essence of Buddhism.

Let us return to Buddha's time for a closer look at the meaning of renunciation and cultivation. Śramaṇa in its original sense refers to renunciants and ascetics, practitioners of the fourth stage of cultivation in the Hindu tradition (also known as saṃnyāsin, the renunciation stage). Scholars Junjirō Takakusu and Taiken Kimura discussed śramaṇa in the following passage in *A History of Indian Philosophy and Religions*:⁷

Like clouds and water, [the sramana] travels between different places in all directions... which is against the rules of rites. The hermits had their heads shaved, wore simple clothing, and traveled with a staff, water strainer, and *zudabukuro* (sack for alms). Having renounced all their worldly possessions, and without a fixed dwelling place, they depended on charity for their life's necessities; these are the general principles. Precepts were the core of their practice. The *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* discusses the five rules of no taking of life, no false speech, no stealing of others' wealth, perseverance, and eschewing possessions. They practiced meditation in silence and through purposeful non-action, lest their minds are disturbed. At night they would rest under trees or on rocks, though never dwelling in one place for long. They sought sustenance but abstained from meat and extravagant food. For food offerings, they would enter towns at dusk and visit no more than seven houses. They did not become dismayed when offerings were not given, nor would they waver over words of praise or ridicule. They saw life and death as one, seeking emancipation through cultivation as life's only purpose... One rule to be noticed among all was *varsā*, a retreat observed during the monsoon season. Since hermits are not sent out for traveling during this time and most insects and wild animals come out, and one might harm insects and wild animals, this is a rule of remaining in one location during *varsā*. These ancient practices of a bhikṣu had become the norm for Buddhism and Jainism. All [practices] are the same, including the five precepts, *varsā*, life without desire or attachments, migrating meditation, and alms rounds.

The truth of the matter is that in India during the Buddha's time, asceticism and seclusive practices were efforts to recognize and criticize the caste system. Of course, only the elites such as Brahmins had the right to practice meditative cultivation. Nonetheless, śramaṇa represented an alternative system outside of the caste system, and in this system, one may renounce all privileges bestowed on them in the caste system in pursuing the value of life. In other words, practices of seclusion, asceticism, and detachment allowed people to transcend the restrictive hierarchy and achieve egalitarianism that was otherwise impossible. Through śramaṇa, all sentient beings are equal, all have the potential to achieve buddhahood. In ancient India, this ideal of buddha-nature and equality made it possible to transcend the social institution in ancient India, which was the ultimate purpose of cultivation for śramaṇas and their ascetic and seclusive practices.

In *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intents of the Buddha*, Venerable Master Hsing Yun hopes to eliminate the differences in systems that emerged when Buddhism was facing different societies and situations and bring back the spirit of Buddhism in the time of the Buddha when, as Prince Siddhattha, he reflected on the societal injustices inflicted by the caste system on the Indian people. The young prince vowed to end the suffering caused by this rigid hierarchical system where people were born into different groups, giving immense privileges to some and insurmountable adversity to others. After years of cultivation and meditation, he attained enlightenment through the realization of the truths of dependent origination and the equality of all beings.

Upon enlightenment, the Buddha taught that the only way to truly resolve the problems about “life, mind, and affairs” in daily life is to lead a life in the middle way, free from the turmoil of emotional ups and downs and the delusion of the absolutes of existence and emptiness. Out of the Buddha's compassion for all sentient beings, Buddhism is present in this human world. As suggested by the saying, “Buddha's birth into this world brought inspiration, teaching, benefit, and joy,” the Buddha's propagation of Buddhism was for the goal of promoting more happiness and joy in the world. Therefore, Humanistic Buddhism captures the essence of Buddhism. With *bodhicitta*, we are to embark on the bodhisattva path to serve others, and to promote wellbeing to all sentient beings without expectation of reward or benefit to self. We are to engage with this world without forming attachments. In other words, Humanistic Buddhism emphasizes the practice of the Buddha's way. Though our goal is to become a buddha

as the result of long practice, in that practice, we must engage with all sentient beings. To practice Buddhism, one must give rise to the bodhi mind of “reaching upwards for Buddhahood while delivering all sentient beings below;” one must also take the bodhisattva path of “benefiting self and others, self-realization of Buddhahood” to awaken oneself and others—only then can we attain Buddhahood of “perfection of realization and practices.” So, [in order to go] from human path to Buddhahood, the practice of the bodhisattva path is required. Humanistic Buddhism advocates an engaged approach to cultivation, starting with the Four Noble Truths, to the Four Universal Vows and the Six *Pāramitās*. Such an engaged approach facilitates Buddhists’ self-cultivation, but also offers the skillful means for liberation in life, bringing life to a higher level and allowing Humanistic Buddhism to place a dual emphasis on understanding and practice, as well as the harmony of past and present.⁸

Has Chinese Buddhism departed too far from Buddhism in its original form? Is Humanistic Buddhism still Buddhism? Venerable Master Hsing Yun emphasizes that the studies of Buddhism often focus too much on how sects and schools of Buddhism differ, and how the teachings of Buddhism varies between different traditions throughout its historical development. This comparative approach lends itself well to the discussion of the differences, strengths and weaknesses, but at the cost of alienating the different sects and schools from each other. Therefore, Venerable Master Hsing Yun has called for us to “hold true to the Buddha’s original intents, to harmonize and unite all Buddhists across time, geography, customs, and cultural differences.” He has reminded us that “we nevertheless respect, accept, and cooperate with those different from us.” To hold true to the original intents of the Buddha, we need to practice mutual respect, acceptance, and believing that all sentient beings have Buddha nature. Only then can we work together towards building the future of Buddhism.⁹

So, one key common thread among the different sects of Buddhism, including Indian Buddhism, Theravāda Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism, or Tibetan Buddhism, is this respect for each other, and belief in the Buddha nature of all sentient beings and in the value of equality for all. The different approaches to Buddhism are nothing but different manifestations of this common thread as Buddhism has interacted with different cultural, societal, and political systems in different regions. These core values of Buddhism all center around human beings, both the self and others. It goes from self-discipline and kindness toward others to further

liberation from suffering, and perfecting the cultivation of mind and body.

Therefore, it would be inaccurate to consider Buddhism a reclusive religion incapable of or uninterested in this-worldly affairs. Buddhism's approach to engaging with society and being involved with this-worldly concerns, however, does differ from that of Christianity in terms of motivations. Weber points out that Christianity approaches philanthropic work as God's grace, rather than with compassion from within. Specifically, they follow the three principles which are relevant for the Christian approach to philanthropy:¹⁰

The first principle is *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside of the church there is no salvation). For those who are not a member of the church with privilege, salvation is not possible. The second principle is that the ability to effectively give is the grace of God and it does not depend on the charisma of individual priests. The third principle states that the requirement of faith of the person being saved matters little to those organizations who have the right to render salvation.

Honoring God is often the ultimate motivation in the Judaic, Christian, and Islamic approaches to endeavor in this-worldly affairs, including philanthropic work, rather than the goal of benefiting others or self. Other considerations such as sin, merit, and honor play a role as well, instead of empathy, compassion, and humanistic concern. In other words, extrinsic motivations drive such efforts, rather than the simple joy of giving. Philanthropic work operates as a systematic organizational behavior, rather than individual acts of kindness that are shaped by personal values or emotions.

In comparison, the Buddhist approach to compassion and philanthropy centers around our intrinsic nature. Venerable Yin Shun stated that "compassion is the fundamental of Buddhism." This refers to the deep concerns one develops for all sentient beings upon contemplating the law of dependent origination. The Buddha called such empathy "dharma of self-assimilation with others;" from which compassion gives rise to ethics and values.¹¹ Thus, the Buddhist approach to this-worldly affairs begins with a humanistic concern for others and with compassion.

Original Buddhism has expressed the appeal for equality among sentient beings through seclusive and ascetic practices, thereby explaining the value and concept of "all beings have Buddha nature" and "all beings can attain Buddhahood." Similarly, today's Humanistic Buddhism returns to Buddha's original intents by engaging with

this-worldly concerns of society and seeking to benefit others. To attain full personhood is to attain buddhahood. Therefore, Buddhists are no longer other-worldly, seclusive hermits detached from this-worldly affairs. By engaging with this-worldly concerns, Buddhists participate in, improve, and benefit society with their service and compassion, seeking a Pure Land on Earth.

Original Buddhism may have been “what the Buddha taught” thousands of years ago, but its existence and relevance today depend on “what the people need,” and whether Buddhism can meet that need and benefit society by promoting its key values. Buddhism seeks to purify minds and improve lives, prompting people to apply principles of compassion and virtue to their pursuit of worthy goals in life. Therefore, Humanistic Buddhism is a natural direction for the future of Buddhism.

Therefore, Buddhism is no longer a religion of seclusion and retreat from society. Asceticism is a means and cultivation is the way to enlightenment. Meditative seclusion and other cultivation practices, including asceticism, are to free individuals from the Saha World and reach the Pure Land. Is the Pure Land only to be sought in one’s next life, in the Western Pure Land? Not necessarily. When the realization is attained in the here and now, the mind is the buddha. A Pure Land can be attained in the human world if we believe that all sentient beings are equal, all can possibly attain Buddhahood, and all possess the buddha-nature. Therefore, Venerable Master Hsing Yun emphasizes the following:

Honor your family and country.
Manage your life with principles of moderation.
Treat others and life’s affairs with the understanding of causes
and conditions.
Seek harmony and joy in your hearts and minds.
These are the four guiding principles of Humanistic Buddhism.

Notes

- 1 Kang Le, “The Concept of Cakravartirājan and Its Influence on Medieval Chinese Kingship,” *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology Academia Sinica* 67, no. 1 (March 1996): 109-143, 138.
- 2 Related statements can be found in Chang Mau-Kuei and Lin Pen-Hsuan, “The Social Image of Religion: A Research Problem for Sociology of Knowledge,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica* 74 (1993): 95-123, 110. See also, Hajime Nakamura, *Chinese Ways of Thinking*, trans. Hsu Fu-Kuan (Taipei: Chinese Culture Publishing Committee, 1953).
- 3 Jan, Yün-hua, “A Study of Zhiyi’s *Great Calming and Contemplation*: Assimilation and Transformation of Indian’s Samatha-vipassana and Chinese Meditation,” *Anthology of Papers on the Study of Chinese Chan* (Taipei: Tung-chu Publishing), 108-137.
- 4 Lai Yonghai, *Buddhism and Confucianism* (Taipei: Yang-Chih Book Co., 1995), 307-308.

- 5 Weber, *Religion and the World: Weber Anthology 2*, trans. Kang Le and Jian Huimei (Taipei: Yuan-Liou Publishing, 1989), 103.
- 6 Cheng, Lin, "A Discussion on Weber's "Sinicization of Buddhism," 2011 Taiwan Symposium and Annual Conference on Sociology, <https://2011tsa.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/e69e97e98c9a.pdf>
- 7 Weber, "The Son of Heaven and Cakravartirājan: Some Cases of the Evolution of "The Power of Kings" in Medieval China" in Lin Fushi, ed., trans. Kang Le, Chien Hui-mei, *New Discourses on Chinese History: The Religion Volume* (Nangang: Academia Sinica, 2010), 135-216, 176-177.
- 8 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intents of Buddha*, transcribed by Venerable Miao Guang (Taipei: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2016), 24-48.
- 9 *Ibid.* 48-51 °
- 10 Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Liu Yuan and Wang Yuwen (Taipei: Laureate Book Co., 1993), 254.
- 11 Shih, Qingde, *Master Yinshun's Thoughts on the Study of Buddhist Disciplines* (Taipei: Yunlong, 2001), 54.