

**STUDIES ON
HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM Ⅳ**

**HUMAN LIFE
人間佛教研究論文選**

Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism, Taiwan
and
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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND LIFE

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Source

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There are two main schools of Buddhism, *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna*. The former spread from southern India to Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and the island of Java during King Asoka's reign in ancient India. The latter spread from northern India to Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, and the Ryukyu Islands during the reign of the Chinese Emperor Ming of the Han dynasty. It has since disseminated into all parts of Malaysia in the last two or three hundred years. Buddhism has spread throughout the world in two thousand and five hundred years. Today, it is distributed vastly, found not only in the Southeast Asian countries, but also Europe and the United States. The religion is practiced by people in the East and West, and has a significant number of devotees.

However, which group is greater in number? Is it those who have truly studied Buddhism in faith and possess deep knowledge and understanding of it, or is it those who do not have faith, have not studied it deeply, and misunderstand some of its teachings? I think there are many people who have misconceptions about Buddhism because they lack understanding. Therefore, I have chosen the topic of the "relationship between Buddhism and life" to point out some misunderstandings about Buddhism. The aim is to remove some of the common obstacles to understanding, show the benefits of Buddhism to life and society, and establish a meaningful and valuable belief in life.

1. Buddhism is about Life, not Death

Some people think that Buddhism is not required during their lifetime. It is only when they die that Buddhism is needed to save their souls and lead them to heaven. Therefore, many people do not really know Buddhism and do not have a favorable impression of it. Only when a family member dies do they rush to a temple to find a monk to recite *sūtras* as a way to superficially show respect for the deceased. This is professing devotion to the Buddha and Triple Gem only in the time of crisis.

The Buddhist method of teaching the Dharma (*dharmaparyāya*) originally had two aspects: cultivating merit to extend life and transcending

death and rebirth. As stated in the *Sūtra of the Medicine Buddha*, the former aspect is summed up in the principle of improving the body and mind, eliminating calamities and collecting merit, building a harmonious society, governing wisely, maintaining a prosperous economy, and dealing with the various affairs of life in a fair and reasonable manner. As the saying goes, “Praying for and receiving longevity, obtaining prosperity and wealth, and begetting children.” National Master Yu Lin had this verse of praise after reading the *Sūtra of the Medicine Buddha*, “One sees the Yangzhou cranes in the human realm even when drifting on the virtuous Tathāgata path.” The latter aspect of transcending death and rebirth is found in the *Amitābha Sūtra* of Pure Land Buddhism. It holds that those who wholeheartedly chant the Buddha’s name will be reborn in the Western Paradise, and will personally see Amitābha Buddha. Alternatively, one can also help the deceased reach the Pure Land through chanting *sūtras* and reciting the Buddha’s name. This is called the method of transcending death through rebirth.

This practice has been popular since the Song and Ming dynasties in China, and later generations seem to only understand Buddhism as being able to liberate the dead with no seeming relation to life. During this time, the practice of Medicine Buddha became less prominent. Thus, people’s understanding of Buddhism changed over time from a religion concerning life to that of death. If someone in the family passes away, their relatives invite monks to chant *sūtras* over the body. The tradition of Buddhism for the living (Medicine Buddha) became overshadowed by Buddhism for the dead (rebirth in Amitābha’s Pure Land). Sending Buddhism for Human Life to the grave like this would have made the Medicine Buddha who dispels calamities and lengthens life cry out in insult!

The Buddha was born on earth to expound the Dharma to sentient beings. Although his intent was to liberate all sentient beings in the Six Realms, his teaching is focused mainly on human beings. He was born in the human world, not in heaven; he attained buddhahood in the human world; he transmitted the Buddhist teachings in the human world. This shows that the Buddha was in the human realm for humans, and the Buddha’s teachings are also for humans.

Spiritual cultivation in the human realm can bring about perfect attainment.

As Minister Pei Xiu's preface to the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* states, "Souls cycle through the Six Realms; hungry ghost beings and hell beings are distressed; animals are concerned with devils, *asuras* are always angry; heavenly beings indulge in pleasure; only human beings are in the position to cultivate the mind and attain spiritual progress through the right path. If people do not follow the Buddha's teaching and practice, I think he did not do what should be done!" This sentence shows the close and important relationship between Buddhism and the life of a human being.

2. The Dharma is in Accord with Social Customs, not Governed by Them

Social customs follow a logic. Logic here refers to the ethics and norms that instruct people in leading a moral life with proper human relationships. What are proper human relationships? The "Duke Wen of Teng" chapter in *Mencius* states, "...the sage [Shun]; and he appointed Sēeh to be minister of Instruction, and to teach the relations of humanity!—how, between father and son, there should be affection; between ruler and subject, righteousness; between husband and wife, attention to their separate functions; between old and young, a proper distinction; and between friends, fidelity."¹ These are referred to as the five Confucian principles.

Following these five principles in life leads to domestic bliss. Not following them leads to violations of proper human relationships. Therefore, some people think that when Buddhism calls for monastics to renounce domestic life it means that there is no affection between father and son and that there is no righteousness between sovereign and minister. One of the conditions of becoming a monastic is not to marry, and therefore some consider it a breach of social customs.

Within the Fourfold Assembly of Buddhism, members of the lay Buddhist community may marry. Monastics renounce the secular and do not

marry so that they may focus their attention on learning and following the teachings of Buddhism. It is a skillful means to practice, not an abandonment of their parents. Many well-known academics were celebrated, including the philosophers Spinoza, Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Schopenhauer. They remained single to focus on their studies. Do we say they violated ethics? Moreover, Buddhism has established the monastic system to enable a few people to concentrate on studying and practicing Buddhist teachings for the benefit of many. This is a way of repaying the kindness of parents, country, and all sentient beings.

From a Buddhist perspective, it is insufficient to repay our parents by caring for their daily needs and fulfilling their wishes, because their kindness is simply too great. To properly repay them, we need to successfully cultivate our practice to a level that we can help them leave *samsāra*. Accordingly, Master Lianchi remarked in the text *Seven Hooks*, “The weight of the kindness of our parents is heavy like a mountain, such that nothing we can give them can balance the scales. Only when they are free from defilement are the childrens’ obligations fulfilled.”

According to Buddhist teachings, all sentient beings exist in the Six Realms. From this viewpoint, all living beings may have been our parents, siblings, or friends in past lives. Therefore, we not only have to repay our parents, but also all sentient beings, from emperors to our friends. Such a debt of kindness is impossible to repay in a secular sense. It is said that, “The filiality of Śākyamuni Buddha was so great that he went through all *kalpas* to repay the kindness of his family.” Such a complete doctrine of repaying others’ kindness is hard to comprehend for people who do not understand Buddhism.

After the Buddha succeeded in his path of cultivation and enlightenment, he returned to the palace to teach the Dharma to his father, which brought the latter comfort and eased his suffering. During the king’s funeral procession, his nephew Ānanda and grandson Rahula wanted to carry the coffin, yet the Buddha insisted, “It should be me alone. This can serve as an example of filial practice in the secular world.”

The Buddha not only paid attention to filial practices, scriptures such as the *Sūtra of the Great Vow of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva*, *Śiṅgālovāda Sutta*, and the *Yuyē Jing* all expound on filial practices, emphasize ethics, and urge Buddhists to make vows to repay the endless kindness they have received. The *Sūtra of the Great Vow of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva* was spoken by the Buddha to his mother to repay her kindness of giving birth to him. The *Śiṅgālovāda Sūtra* advocated for Śiṅgāla to give reverence to the six directions, which are similar to the six cardinal relationships.

The so-called six cardinal relationships have the following implications. Revering the East is a priority, because it represents parents and spring, which bears great kindness and gives birth to all living beings. The South is revered because it represents our mentors and their teachings. The West is revered as we revere marriage, in which a couple should show respect and gratitude to each other. The North is revered because it represents the relationship between masters and servants, with masters showing mercy to servants and servants doing good deeds for the masters. Below is revered because it represents friendship, which is based on mutual help. Above is revered because it represents religious teachers who guide us toward wisdom. These are in alignment with the Chinese ethical order of society, i.e. the filial relationship between the father and the son, the loyalty of ministers to their lords, the kindness shown to younger siblings and respect shown to older siblings, the relationship of loving care and companionship between husband and wife, and mutual help among friends. These form the basis of an education in proper human relationships.

A harmonious relationship between husband and wife paves the way for happiness in life. As the Buddha stated in *Yuyē Jing*, it is important for a wife to serve her husband, likewise a husband should take care of his wife. This is the basis for a stable domestic life and a smooth path in any venture. This *sūtra* came out of a certain historical context. At that time, Elder Sudatta's daughter-in-law, Lady Sujātā, was very arrogant because of her noble status. She neither paid respect to her elders nor fulfilled her responsibilities towards her husband. However, under the influence of the Buddha's sincere and

heartfelt words, and his ability to teach in accord with the capacity of the learner, the crafty and unruly Lady Sujātā was moved to change her ways and to lose her arrogance and bad temper. She eventually became a good wife and virtuous mother.

3. Buddhism Fosters Group Integration, not Isolation

Group integration refers to taking part in worldly affairs and benefiting others. Some people view Buddhist monastics as living in isolation in the mountains and not being in touch with the sentiments of people and the nature of social life. One reason for this view is that not everyone understands the broad scope and large range of variation in Buddhist practice. Those who see Buddhists as disengaged from society are only seeing one modality of Buddhist practice. Scholars of Buddhism have classified Buddhist teachings into the human vehicle, the heavenly vehicle, the Śrāvaka vehicle, the *Pratyekabuddha* vehicle, and the *bodhisattva* vehicle. Of the five vehicles, Śrāvaka and *Pratyekabuddha* tend toward isolated practice, with practitioners preferring to distance themselves from the disruptions and defilements of the wider society. They emphasize trying to transcend the world to achieve liberation. They have a disengaged attitude that leads them to retreat from society. There are very few people who actually practice in this way. Practitioners of the heavenly and *bodhisattva* vehicles take part in worldly affairs in order to benefit others and save the world. With the power of their great vows, with courage and vitality, they undertake the journey to create pure karma in the defiled world. Buddhism in the human vehicle emphasizes the Five Precepts, which are the essential principles of human relations, and are in accordance with the Five Constant Virtues in Confucianism.

The first of the Five Precepts is to refrain from harm and killing, and instead be benevolent. Harm causes damage to the physical body while killing ends a life. The Buddha exemplified compassion and made it the core of his teaching. The primary emphasis is to refrain from killing, but the precept is not limited to it—we should also protect and save lives. In this way, benevolence is nurtured. If compassion, empathy, sympathy, and not

killing living beings became widespread, the world would be peaceful with all beings living in harmony. However, there are expedient exceptions to the precept, such as self defense against the attack of an enemy to safeguard the nation, capital punishment for criminals who commit serious crimes against the people, or the eradication of pests during a plague. When done without hatred, such killing to prevent greater loss of life is permitted in accordance with the *bodhisattva* precepts.

The second precept is to refrain from stealing or from benefiting from theft. Stealing refers to any type of fraud or secretly taking things that do not belong to you. It also refers to robbery and taking things from others by force. Worldly belongings have owners. Acquiring what does not belong to you without earning it amounts to stealing. Conversely, this precept can also be stated positively. We can benefit others by providing financial aid to them according to their needs. There is virtue in benefiting others. If all of us act to benefit others, the world will no longer be troubled by stealing and society will be secure.

The third precept calls for refraining from sexual misconduct. When women and men are driven by lust, they act in ways that contravene etiquette. Taken too far, lust leads to adultery. Reasonable behavior conforms to etiquette and is righteous, while appropriate restraint results in moral integrity and brings joy. Every family should act in accordance with etiquette, and if this is realized, every household will be peaceful and without strife.

The fourth precept calls for honesty and trustworthiness instead of deception and lies. To deceive is to trick others, and to lie is to mislead others with words. Acting with honesty and sincerity is to be the same person in public as in private, and being trustworthy is to be consistent in speech and action. One who is honest and trustworthy does not deceive or lie. When everyone is honest and maintains their credibility, it is possible to achieve a good social environment with high moral standards where, as the saying goes, “Honesty prevails throughout society and doors are not locked at night.” This is possible, yet it is hard to find such a Pure Land in the human world today.

The fifth precept calls for refraining from consuming intoxicants in order to maintain a clear consciousness. Alcohol is not by its nature evil, but it intoxicates, causes confusion, and can sabotage wholesome acts. And it is not only alcohol that impairs consciousness, consuming mind altering substances that are addictive such as opium, morphine, and heroin also corrupt the body and mind, altering one's temperament and disposition for the worse. When the mind is impaired, one becomes susceptible to unwholesome actions that violate other precepts: killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and lying. By safeguarding against these unwholesome habits, Buddhism brings great benefits to life.

The Ten Wholesome Deeds of the heavenly vehicle are an extension of the Five Precepts. The aspects of physical karma: no killing, no stealing, and no sexual misconduct are the same as the first three of the Five Precepts. The aspects of verbal karma: no lying, no harsh speech, no divisive speech, and no idle banter relate directly to not lying, another of the Five Precepts. The aspects of mental karma within the Ten Wholesome Deeds: no greed, no anger, and no wrong views do not correspond directly to any of the Five Precepts.

The Ten Wholesome Deeds are the good acts of human life. Not killing and not stealing are ways to personal health and happiness. When someone kills, that person fears revenge. When a person is unrighteous and steals, that person harbors guilt. Therefore, that person loses some of the joy in their life. Not engaging in sexual misconduct brings harmony, peace, and happiness to families. By not lying, and not speaking divisively, harshly, or idly, one does not create dispute, vilification, or disharmony among others, thus allowing happiness to prevail in society. Without greed, self-control becomes possible; without anger, forgiveness becomes possible; without wrong views, one understands principles and distinguishes between right and wrong, and therefore does not stray down the wrong path. The Ten Wholesome Deeds serve as standards for the cultivation of goodness in life and the model of how to be an exemplary person.

Focusing only on the transcendent aspect of Buddhism causes some people to not see how the Five Precepts and the Ten Wholesome Deeds directly relate to how an individual operates in a social context.

The Six *Pāramitās* are basically transcendental wholesome acts of the *bodhisattva* vehicle. Because of their great concern for sentient beings, *bodhisattvas* employ their profound level of cultivation to engage in worldly acts in order to benefit sentient beings. Therefore, the Six *Pāramitās* become wholesome acts in human life. With *prajñā* wisdom, a *bodhisattva* joyfully gives without attaching to the notion of generosity; upholds the precepts without attaching to their form; is patient without attaching to the notion of self; is diligent without giving rise to arrogance; and practices meditation without attaching to *samādhi*.

In this way, *bodhisattvas* enter society with a transcendental spirit, and practice the Six *Pāramitās*. The Six *Pāramitās* thus become the ultimate wholesome behaviors of humans. If people truly understand the close relationship between wholesome conduct in Buddhism and in human life, one would never say that the Dharma is detached from and weary of the world.

A disciple once asked the Buddha, “Hell is full of suffering, who shall go down to hell?” The Buddha said, “The Buddha will go down to hell.” In fact, “Not only does the Buddha go down to hell, but he abides in hell. Not only does he abide in hell, but he rejoices in hell. Not only does he rejoice in hell, but he dignifies hell.” So great was the power of the Buddha’s vows, so fearless his spirit, and so absolute his actions, that his magnanimous heart, exemplified by his engagement in society and his love of the people, wins the admiration of all.

Notes

1 James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Translated into English with Preliminary Essays and Explanatory Notes*, vol. 2: The Life and Teachings of Mencius (London: N. Trübner, 1875), 209.

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