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A MODERN INTERPRETATION OF VENERABLE MASTER HSING YUN'S BELIEF THAT "LIFE DOES NOT DIE"

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Source

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1. Preface—*Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intent of Buddha*

In his first preface to *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intent of Buddha*, Venerable Master Hsing Yun adopted simple and easily understood words to summarize the articles of faith and essence of Humanistic Buddhism.¹ In the second preface titled “My Understanding of Humanistic Buddhism,”² Venerable Master Hsing Yun identified the general misconceptions and doubts many people have about Humanistic Buddhism. He outlined the following:

1. Humanistic Buddhism is a secular and prosaic tradition taught only for the Human Vehicle, and does not lead to supreme Buddhahood.³
2. Humanistic Buddhism focuses only on mundane activities that do not bear much relevance to the practice of Dharma.⁴
3. Humanistic Buddhism does not involve spiritual cultivation, and focuses only on ways of personal relationships and dealing with matters irrelevant to the Buddhist practices of transcendence, spiritual growth, and attainment of Buddhahood.⁵
4. Humanistic Buddhism is aimed at lay Buddhists, and does not entail sacredness pertaining to the monastic ways of living, austerity, or enlightenment.⁶
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.⁷
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 of a system.⁸

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.⁹
8. Humanistic Buddhism does not involve a path to liberation, nor leads one to the state of attainment, therefore is not easily accepted by traditional Buddhists.¹⁰

Venerable Master Hsing Yun believes the above issues have to be given careful consideration, but that Buddhists have not helped the general public to understand them. Hence, there must be greater efforts at making Humanistic Buddhism universally available.

In reviewing the past and present state of Buddhism, Venerable Master Hsing Yun lamented that Buddhism had retreated into transcendent practices and lost its spirit of engagement. Monastics had gone into seclusion in the mountains and forests and given up their service to the public. Buddhists relied on empty discourses of the mysterious, failed to apply them in practice, erred on the side of negative exposition, and so lost the truths involved in positive endeavors.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun aspired to restore the original intents of Humanistic Buddhism and answer the questions raised above. The author summarizes Venerable Master Hsing Yun's twenty key principles¹¹ as the following:

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.¹²

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 the 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.¹³
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 all faiths can be harmonized by the concept of Humanistic Buddhism, which embraces all, and serves as a faith for humanity as a whole.¹⁴
4. Humanistic Buddhism is a faith in an eternal life and limitless future. From now on, Humanistic Buddhism will speak more of rebirth within the Ten Dharma Realms and less of the Six Realms.¹⁵
5. Everyone has the 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 *icchāntika*—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.¹⁶
6. While it is said that everyone has the buddha-nature, faith nevertheless differs amongst individuals. Without sufficient devotion and energy,

one cannot transcend to higher levels.¹⁷

7. 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.¹⁸
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 the 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 achieve Buddhahood.¹⁹
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. Life is lived in joy, in boundless space and time, as well as within unlimited connections and achievements.²⁰
10. The ultimate goal of Humanistic Buddhism does not inherently reside in the attainment of buddhahood. Since the Buddha had declared that everyone possesses the 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 realm, it would also mean that the self is equal and coexists with all beings within the Ten Dharma Realms.²¹

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.²²
12. Humanistic Buddhism aims to achieve a state of mind that is free from worries, fears, and delusions. Through the virtues of honesty, kindness, 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 destination.²³
13. Humanistic Buddhism believes that we can unify ourselves with others. Just as in 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.²⁴
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. 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 nirvana.” This is the world of Humanistic Buddhism.²⁵

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, or virtue and evil no longer matter. Furthermore, one will no longer be influenced by the Five Desires and Six Sense Fields. Is this not a state of liberation?²⁶
16. The value of faith lies in broadening one's horizons, elevating oneself, liberating oneself, and harmonizing self and the world. "Be your own mentor."²⁷
17. This world is comprised of half Buddha and half Māra. One principle the Buddha has 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 judgments, no one else's. We are the only ones who will be facing our own karma.²⁸
18. Living in a community is about self-purification, self-management, and self-education. The purpose of collective cultivation is to maintain mutual respect of people's conduct, shared values, equal distribution of benefits, harmonious social coexistence, loving and kind speech, as well as the mental joy of spiritual attainment.²⁹
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.³⁰
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 are practicing so happens to be Humanistic Buddhism.³¹

2. The Notion that “Life does not Die” in Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s Humanistic Buddhism

In the twenty essential principles above, seven relate to the subject of “life does not die.” Its importance clearly indicates it is a core belief in Humanistic Buddhism. The seven principles can be generalized into the following core beliefs of Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s view on “life does not die”:

1. Life is eternal and without bounds. What cannot die exists in a state without birth and death, and exists without arising and ceasing.
2. Whether it is the Six Realms of Existence or the Ten Dharma Realms, both imply a limitless future. According to the belief of Humanistic Buddhism, there is no duality of time and space and no concern about birth and death. Life is lived in joy, in boundless space and time, as well as within unlimited connections and achievements.
3. 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, and both self and countless living beings coexist as one. Life as we know it is both discrete and connected. Liberation can be rightly attained within the cycle of rebirth, thus the latter is not a problem.
4. Faith has differing levels, and is what determines our future destinations. It can lead us to the state of eternity that frees us from birth and death. 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.

Below is my personal understanding and interpretation of the core belief of “life does not die” in Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s Humanistic Buddhism.

3. Understanding and Interpreting the Core Belief of “Life does not Die” in Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s Humanistic Buddhism

3.1 “Non-arising and Non-ceasing” vs “Causes Arising and Ceasing”: A Dual View of the True Nature of Life

In order to correctly understand how we pass through the cycle of life and death, we must first comprehend how Buddhism fundamentally understands how the lives of sentient beings come about. According to the core teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the life of a sentient being simultaneously possesses two levels and dimensions, i.e. “non-arising and non-ceasing” and “causes arising and ceasing.”

According to the doctrine, the life force of a sentient being (conventionally called a soul) has neither beginning nor end, and is without limit or bound. In Buddhist terms, this life force is also known as “buddha-nature.” This should not be regarded as something created by a “creator.” Therefore the buddha-nature of a sentient being is not created. This links it to “non-birth.” This life force is immune from destruction or extinguishment by any kind of force. This relates it to “non-extinguishment.” Taken together, “non-arising and non-ceasing” are at the level of absolute truth.

Furthermore, on the level of physical phenomena, though sentient beings possess buddha-nature (intrinsic to life) which is “non-arising and non-ceasing,” each of their limitless and infinite flows of consciousness are influenced by karmic forces, its attachment to self and *dharmas*,³² as well as by ignorance and afflictions.³³ This buddha-nature goes through multiple rebirths and various conditions of cognitive and physical states on its journey through space and time. It may progressively elevate itself to becoming a sage, a *bhadra*, or even a buddha, but could also descend into poor rebirths of an animal or in a hell being. “Causes arising and ceasing” is at the level of relative truth.

To summarize, Mahāyāna Buddhism's view of life, of the “non-arising and non-ceasing” and “causes arising and ceasing,” represents two sides of a single coin. In absolute terms, life is without beginning, end, bounds, or limits. However, in relative terms sentient beings undergo rebirth because they are afflicted with ignorance and mental afflictions, and because bodies are naturally subjected to a limited number of years as a physical form. But our intrinsic buddha-nature will never be extinguished or destroyed, and so the cycle of life continues. Therefore, Venerable Master Hsing Yun places emphasis in Humanistic Buddhism on the core belief that “life does not die.” He stresses that his view, with regard to the state of “unborn and undying” and an existence which “neither arises nor ceases,” is founded upon Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings.

3.2 The Limitations of our Material Being vs the Perpetuity of our Spiritual Life

The *Triṃśikā-Vijñaptimātratā* (composed by Vasubandhu and translated [into Chinese] by Venerable Master Xuanzang) states:

The metaphor of self and *dharmas*
Evolves in various ways
Upon the transformation of consciousness.
The transforming consciousness is threefold:
Retribution, thought, and perception of the external realm.
First, the *alaya* [store] consciousness is [also] retribution
and holder of all seeds.
That which it grasps and holds, its location, and its
perceptions are imperceptible.
It is always associated with mental contact,
Attention, feeling, conceptualization, and volition.
In it, the only feeling is one of indifference.
It is undefiled and morally neutral,
And the same is true of mental contact, etc.
It always evolves like a flowing stream,

And is abandoned in the state of *arhat*.³⁴

There are three key lines in the above verse: “First, the *alaya* [store] consciousness...It always evolves like a flowing stream, [and] is abandoned in the state of *arhat*.³⁵ This is a description of the perpetual nature and life of sentient beings, and the continuous flow of consciousness. In fact, it is not just *alaya*, but also manas consciousness “always evolves like a flowing stream.”³⁶ Only when one attains the fruit of an arhat is knowledge transformed into wisdom, and one can relinquish and arrest the delusions of the stream-like consciousness.

What this verse reveals is that before attaining the fruit of an *arhat*, consciousness is “always flowing like a stream,”³⁷ and this is true even at the moment of physical death. If “death” implies an ending and an extinguishing, then from the perspective of “always flowing like a stream,”³⁸ our lives are fundamentally “indestructible.” After attaining the fruit of an *arhat*, life certainly “cannot die” when one has reached a higher level of continuous development, because here knowledge becomes wisdom.

There is a profound implication in the fact that Venerable Master Hsing Yun placed special emphasis on “life cannot die” in the core teachings of Humanistic Buddhism. Since “life cannot die” is “perpetual” and therefore we should conceive of it on the principle of sustainable development. Oddly though, we often only concern ourselves with the finite life of our physical body, neglecting the ongoing development of the infinite life of the mind.

3.3 The Causes and Effects of Life, and the Mystery of Life and Death: The “Six Realms of Existence” and “Passing through the Cycle of Life and Death”

Regarding the causes and effects of life and the mystery of life and death, historically there have been a series of questions raised: Is life created by a creator, or is it a product of nature? Do I have a single or multiple lives? Is the entire process finite or infinite? These are mysteries that have existed

throughout the ages, there is still no conclusion, and it is unlikely that there will be a universal consensus in the future. To summarize the existing theories that have appeared through history, there are roughly three categories that can be found: nihilism, eternalism, and the theory of rebirth or reincarnation.

Nihilism is the perspective of materialism and atheism. It posits that after death, beings turn into dust and disappear into thin air, and that a soul does not exist. This view is refuted by all religions in the East and the West.

Eternalism posits that there is an eternal and unchanging self which transforms into an eternal and unchanging soul after death, which may either go to heaven, hell, or wander the cosmos. This position is assumed by most religions in the East and the West.

The theory of rebirth or reincarnation regards passing through the cycle of life and death (*saṃsāra*) as a way to explain the phenomena of transmigration and the mystery of life and death of sentient beings.

3.3.1 A View of Life's Sustainable Development: The Idea of Rebirth Exists across Multiple Cultures and Epochs

The life of a sentient being is fundamentally a process of passing through the cycle of life and death. Buddhism employs the perspective of having multiple lives and the process of *saṃsāra* to explain the phenomena of transmigration and the mystery of life and death, which can be said to be a most penetrating analysis. There is a general misconception that only Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Buddhism posit the cycle of life and death, but this is not true.

Concepts of rebirth or reincarnation already existed in ancient Western philosophical and religious texts, but they have unfortunately been buried and forgotten by many. The ancient Greek mathematician Pythagoras (570-495 BCE) himself was an advocate of this theory, which Plato (428-348 BCE) inherited. Unfortunately this fact was obscured for later generations.

In fact, the early Christian religion did not reject reincarnation. There exist textual references to this in the early versions of the *Old Testament* and *New Testament*, and the priests of the early church accepted the concept of reincarnation. There were also many saints who believed they had past lives and would have future lives.

The *New Testament* clearly shows that Jesus Christ himself believed in reincarnation. According to Matthew 17:1-13, Christ revealed to three of his disciples Peter, James, and John that John the Baptist was actually the reincarnation of the ancient prophet Elijah.

Regrettably, these textual references to reincarnation in the *New Testament* were removed by Constantine the Great, who was the first in the Roman Empire to legalize Christianity (313 CE), and by his mother in 325 CE. Later in 553 CE, these viewpoints and statements were further condemned as heresy and became prohibited by Justinian I and the Second Council of Constantinople. For that reason, the West continuously suppressed the theory of reincarnation until the idea faded from memory. This led to most people in European and American societies not being aware of or believing in reincarnation for more than 1,400 years.

Now, due to the application of hypnotism in the fields of psychological counselling and psychotherapy in European and American countries, there are now clinical reports that document the recollection of past lives or multiple lifetimes by patients under hypnosis. An example is the book *Many Lives, Many Masters* authored by the American doctor Brian Weiss which has gained mass popularity. With the evolution of modern thinking, the view that life spans multiple lifetimes, the theory of reincarnation has broken the popular stereotype that it is a religious superstition, and informed the exploratory psychiatric fields of depth psychology and parapsychology.

Although the concept of rebirth is familiar, generally accepted, and a basic tenet of faith among ethnic Chinese globally, based on the influence of traditional Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, it has mostly been

distorted through vulgarization and outlandish claims. As a result, few people understand it and intellectuals have denounced it as superstition. Are there really Six Realms of Existence in the world? Is rebirth fact or superstition? What is the truth regarding the Six Realms of Existence? These are questions in most people's minds, regardless of their belief about rebirth.

3.3.2 The Six Realms of Existence and Passing through the Cycle of Life and Death as Descriptions of the Entire Ecosystem of the Sentient World

From the perspective of Buddhist phenomenological interpretation, the principle of the cycle of birth and death is neither superstitious nor mystical. In short, passing through the cycle of life and death is the ecosystem of the sentient world, which here includes the Three Realms [desire, form, and formless], and all sentient beings residing within them. In other words, the Buddha regarded the universe and its sentient beings (i.e., the entire *dharma* realm and its sentient beings) as a whole and, by observing phenomena, made a systematic description and summary explanation of its cycles. This is by no means superstitious.

The philosophical analysis of the theory of rebirth discloses that it pertains to the level of conventional truth. It is a phenomenological description, rather than a metaphysical definition, of the cycle of birth and death that sentient beings in the Three Realms undergo. It is not the ultimate (Skt. *paramārtha*) truth of the universe or of the reality of life.

Phenomenologically speaking, the Six Realms of Existence delimit the experienced process of sentient beings with respect to the universe as a whole. Transmigration is a phenomenon that belongs to conventional rather than the absolute truth. The Six Realms of Existence do not change, and therefore are empirically factual phenomena. However, the great majority of sentient beings do not understand rebirth because they miss the forest for the trees.

As for what is termed the “afterlife,” it is in fact a myth and misunderstanding given the Buddhist understanding of the entire *dharma* realm. The Three, Six, and Ten Realms of Buddhist cosmology are a holistic system, and no such afterlife exists independently. Strictly speaking, life and the afterlife belong to the very same *dharma* realm, and thus the latter term is really a misnomer which is merely true in a relative sense. In other words, the afterlife is posited relative to pre-mortem life, just as married life is relative to unmarried life. They really belong to the same world, but appear distinctly different in terms of psychological responses and life experience.

Furthermore, the general misperception that rebirth refers to sentient beings being reborn at the end of their lives according to their wholesome and unwholesome *karma* is a one-sided view which does not truly accord with the meaning of passing through the cycle of life and death. In fact, that meaning rather pertains to the inexhaustible ecosystem of life in the universe.

Broadly speaking, the true meaning of rebirth more completely refers to it occurring every minute and second in the course of life—we are drifting in it without being aware of it. Therefore, Buddhist scriptures use the term “the great sea of life and death” to describe the real cycle of birth and death that sentient beings otherwise have no means of escaping.

Therefore, from the perspective of Buddhism’s emphasis on contemplation and practice, we see that one does not have to wait until the end of life to clearly understand the cycle of birth and death, or how one passes through it. One merely has to grasp the present opportunity to contemplate the non-arising and non-ceasing of all phenomena.

3.3.3 Discontinuous Life and Death³⁹

Having grasped a fundamental understanding of life, one can gain further insight into the cycle of birth and death by broadening one’s perspective on life. If one observes from the broader perspective of life being a continuous and never-ending process, it is understood in terms of an alternation between

living and non-living states, and so denoted by the term *pariccheda-cyuti* (discontinuous life and death).⁴⁰ In Buddhist teachings, the characteristics of the cycle of life and death can be traced to dependent origination, while in terms of its phenomenology, the discontinuous life and death of sentient beings can be categorized into the *catvāro bhavāh* (four states of being)⁴¹ which as sequential and cyclical stages include:

1. *pūrvakālabhava*: life between birth to death, i.e., sentient beings' life span;
2. *maranabhava*: the moment of death preceding rebirth, i.e., the end of a life span;
3. *antarābhava*: the intermediate form of existence of a sentient being between its death and rebirth; and
4. *upapattibhava*: birth, the beginning of another life.

The *catvāro bhavāh* constitute a sequential cycle without beginning or end. I combined this perspective with that of Dependent Origination to explain the process of sentient beings' discontinuous life and death.

From this perspective, the cycle of life and death that sentient beings undergo loops between life and death, and is without an ending or beginning. Hence a 'nihilist' approach to life—that death is the ultimate end—cannot in the Buddhist view be maintained. Conversely, *maranabhava*—that death is relative to a succeeding life—then becomes the transition point in the *pariccheda-cyuti* (discontinuous death). Paradoxically, death is on one hand a terminal limit that cuts off present existence from future life, but on the other hand also the nexus that connects the two.

Therefore, holistically speaking, life does not end; ultimately speaking, “death” is but the external form, ultimately illusory, of the sentient being's transition from one life to another. In other words, a “virtual reality” that presents itself in the course of the overall transformation. Stated another way, “death” is but a state of (temporal and spatial) transition experienced by sentient beings in the course of a causally continuous existence. It marks the

“end,” from the perspective of the present life, and signifies the “beginning” from the perspective of a future one.

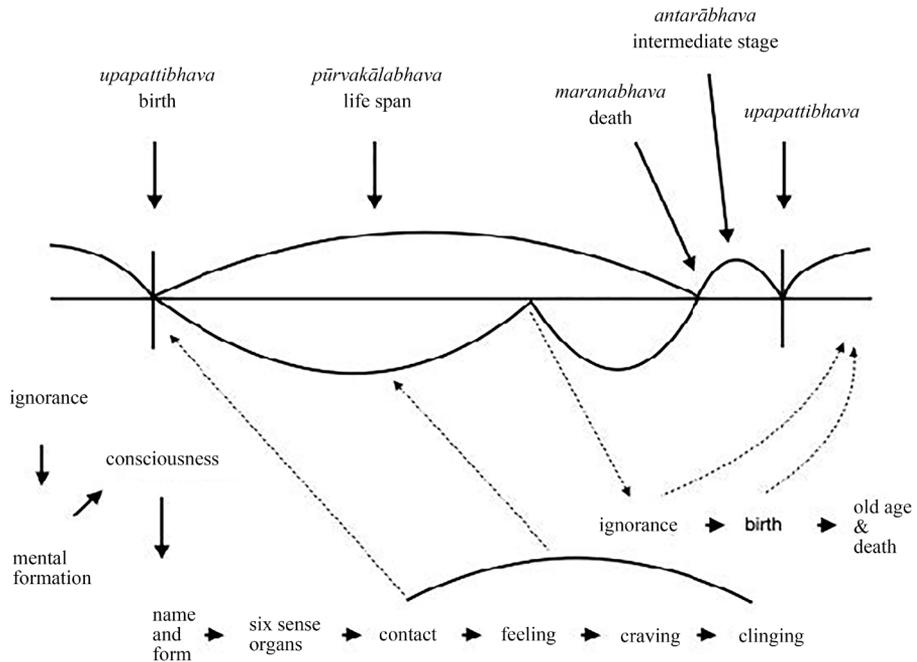


Figure 1: Schematic diagram showing the life and death cycle. Adapted from the author’s original.

3.4 Liberation Happens within the Cycle of Rebirth: An Investigation into “Rebirth” and “Liberation”

3.4.1 “Being-towards-death” vs “Being-towards-continuous-living”

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) undertook an existential analysis of death in his book *Being and Time*. He proposed the concept of human existence as “being-towards-death,” clearly pointing out that death is ineliminably central to humans’ existence.⁴² In his analytical scheme, Heidegger seems to have assumed that we only live a single lifetime, and therefore death is the absolute terminal end to life, and so he posited that human existence was a “being-towards-death.”

However, from the perspective that life extends through the past, present, and future across multiple lifetimes, death is merely a *pariccheda-cyuti* (discontinuous death) relative to sentient beings' continuous life, a transition that connects the previous with a future life. Hence, in this context, one no longer exists as "towards-death" but rather "towards-continuous-existence." From this perspective, "death" takes on a new meaning; it is on the one hand a terminus that separates the present from future life, but on the other hand also the nexus that connects the two.

Irrespective of the view that holds that life is "toward-continuous-existence," the ignorance and vexations of individual beings, and the collective karma and sufferings of societies, are not thereby mitigated or eliminated. Therefore, Buddhism does not regard the cycle of birth and death as the ultimate truth or reality of life, but rather as the manifestation of this "continuous existence."

3.4.1 The Cycle of Birth and Death (*saṃsāra*) vs Liberation (*Nirvāṇa*)

What then is the ultimate way out of this cycle, and where is the final destination for sentient beings? Both the Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhist traditions regard *nirvāṇa* and tranquility as the ultimate goal. However, *nirvāṇa* in the Theravāda teachings denotes permanently escaping the cycle of birth and death, and hence has as its final destination arhatship, which is without remainder, the cessation of perception and sensation, and liberation from the cycle of life and death. As such, this sense of *nirvāṇa* dualistically denotes the extinguishing of the body and mind, and ending life itself. It was continuously subject to criticism by Confucianists and Daoists throughout Chinese history.

Nirvāṇa in the Mahāyāna teachings refers rather to an ontological dimension that is non-dualistically equivalent to that of *saṃsāra* (the cycle of life and death) itself. The goal of *nirvāṇa* thus motivates the *bodhisattva* path, which neither abides in *saṃsāra*, nor enters *nirvāṇa*, and on which the *bodhisattva* will risk life and limb in achieving liberation for all sentient beings.

The state of *nirvāṇa* in the Mahāyāna *bodhisattva* path is one of eliminating ignorance and vexation, but not of an absolute dissociation from life, for that is impossible. The *Diamond Sutra* says, “The person who gives rise to the intention for peerless perfect enlightenment does not claim the extinction of the marks of phenomena.”⁴³ Life continues in the cycle of *samsāra* because it is continually driven by *karma*; life reaches liberation and transcendence because of constant self-purification from that *karma*.

According to the teachings of the *bodhisattva* path, if one applies this principle to the investigation of life and death, one concludes that the cycle of *samsāra* is not separate from *nirvāṇa*, or liberation, the important distinction rather being between whether the mind of the sentient being who so transmigrates is ignorant or enlightened. One who cannot contemplate all phenomena with the *prajñā* that perceives Dependent Origination would separate *nirvāṇa* from birth and death, and furthermore be compelled by ignorance and afflictions from within and the causes of suffering from without, to naturally develop an aversion toward life and death while seeking the state of *nirvāṇa* wholly outside of the cycle. If one contemplates profoundly the reality of all phenomena with *prajñā*, one realizes that life and death are not separate from *nirvāṇa*, and that the latter is cultivated and ultimately obtained within the experience of the former, without which *nirvāṇa* cannot be sought.

4. Conclusion: Practicing the *Bodhisattva* Path in Humanistic Buddhism

In “My Understanding of Humanistic Buddhism,” Venerable Master Hsing Yun stated that, “Liberation can be rightly attained within the cycle of rebirth” and “while faith has differing levels...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.”⁴⁴ At a glance, the statement “liberation can be rightly attained within the cycle of rebirth” seems paradoxical. Logically, liberation from the cycle is a major issue. It appears that if one is in the cycle then one is not liberated and vice versa, so how could this statement be true? It turns out that Venerable Master Hsing Yun is not referring to these concepts as

they are usually understood, but rather to the belief and practice of Humanistic Buddhism's *bodhisattva* path.

There are three different levels on which sentient beings engage the cycle of *saṃsāra*. Most ordinary beings cling abjectly to life yet lead a befuddled existence, drifting in the great sea of birth and death as a result of ignorance and vexation. Practitioners of the two early Buddhist vehicles (Śrāvaka & Pratyekabuddhas) see the cycle of life and death as a heavy burden, and strive to destroy the bondage to rebirth by transcending birth, being liberated from death, and entering into *nirvāṇa* without remainder. Conversely, the aspiration and practice of the *bodhisattva* path is based on the principle of willingly risking life and limb (for the sake of sentient beings) without fear of birth and death, and on seeing the the cycle of birth and death as the means and medium by and in which to liberate sentient beings. Examples include Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva who in her great compassion seeks and answers the calls of those suffering, and Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva who has the attitude of “If I do not descend into hell, who will?”⁴⁵ So, we say that, “Liberation can be rightly attained within the cycle of rebirth.”

The practice of Humanistic Buddhism is like that of the *bodhisattvas* who liberate sentient beings from suffering—one of shouldering responsibility on a long journey. The aspiration of the *bodhisattva* path in Humanistic Buddhism is boundless and infinite, because the realm of sentient beings is similarly infinite. Therefore, teaching and transformation, as well as the task of liberating sentient beings, is endless. Likewise, the aspirants' loving kindness and compassionate vows are also infinite.

The spirit of the *bodhisattva* path in Mahāyāna Buddhism lies in its practice and compassionate vow to bring universal salvation to all sentient beings. This spirit is not pessimistic, but sees matters as they really are. With such wisdom, one can observe and contemplate the true reality of the Dharma (like Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva contemplating at ease). With the *bodhisattva* spirit, one is devoid of negativity and can boldly advance through proper and diligent practice to free oneself from extensive mental afflictions

(contemplating profoundly the *prajñāparamitā*). Being engaged in the world rather than retreating from it, one protects boundless sentient beings in one's great vow of compassion (to overcome all ills and sufferings).⁴⁶ This spirit is equivalent to that of the *bodhisattvas* Avalokiteśvara, who seeks those who call for help in suffering, Samantabhadra, who has inexhaustible cultivation and vows, and Kṣitigarbha, who enters hell to liberate sentient beings.

In addition, those on Humanistic Buddhism's *bodhisattva* path aspire not for individual liberation, but rather for all sentient beings to attain a state of unhindered perfection. Individual liberation is without meaning and imperfect if the majority of beings are still suffering in *saṃsāra*. Hence, the state of *nirvāṇa* for this path lies not in seeking individual liberation, but rather to perfect the seeds of wisdom together with all sentient beings.

In the “Chapter on Expedient Means” of the *Lotus Sūtra*, we find that “the state of the Dharma is permanent and unchangeable in this world.”⁴⁷ The “Chapter on the Vows of Samantabhadra” in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* also speaks of the boundlessness and infinity of the realm of sentient beings cycling through birth and death. It is precisely because of the limitless suffering of the world that the qualities of the *bodhisattvas* are so superlative—the great compassion of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva seeking those who call for help in suffering, the inexhaustible cultivation and vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva who endures all difficulties, and the boundless great vows of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva in the spirit of “Who else but me?” The imperfection of this world highlights the need for the perfection of the conduct and vows of the *bodhisattva* in Humanistic Buddhism.

The Humanistic Buddhism advocated by Venerable Master Hsing Yun is founded upon the Buddha's original intent, and bears the great responsibility of benefiting societies and purifying the human mind. It therefore greatly needs the support and participation of the public. Humanistic Buddhism is guided by the Buddha's teachings; the liberation of sentient beings is its spirit; the conduct, aspiration, and skill of the *bodhisattva* are its essence. It aims to realize a pureland in the human world, full of kindness, compassion, joy,

equanimity, harmony, and happiness. May this article serve as inspiration for all *bodhisattva* practitioners of Humanistic Buddhism.

Notes

- 1 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intents of Buddha*, narration recorded by Venerable Miao Guang of the Fo Guang Shan Secretariat (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2016), xiii-xiv.
- 2 This article is also available in English in Volume 1 of the *Studies on Humanistic Buddhism* series at <https://journal.nantien.edu.au/2018/10/02/my-understanding-of-humanistic-buddhism/>. -Ed.
- 3 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intents of Buddha*, narration recorded by Venerable Miao Guang of the Fo Guang Shan Secretariat (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2016), xiii.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid., xiv.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intents of Buddha*, narration recorded by Venerable Miao Guang of the Fo Guang Shan Secretariat (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2016), xv-xxi. Ed: The English translation is adapted from Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism, Taiwan and Nan Tien Institute, Australia, "My Understanding of Humanistic Buddhism," *Studies on Humanistic Buddhism* 1 (2018): 61-6.
- 12 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intents of Buddha*, narration recorded by Venerable Miao Guang of the Fo Guang Shan Secretariat (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2016), xv.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid. xv-xvi.
- 16 Ibid. xvi.
- 17 Ibid. xvii.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid. xviii.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid. xix.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid. xix-xx.
- 26 Ibid. xx.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid. xxi.

- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 “Self and dharma attachment” is a summary term of “self-attachment” and “attachment to dharmas.” Sects such as the Sarvāstivāda posit the existence of the *dharmakāya*, and thus are known to be attached to a self. On the other hand, Mahāyāna Buddhism views all things as empty, positing that the dharmas exist, and thus are known to be attached to the dharmas. These two positions are jointly known as “self and dharma attachment.” “Attachment to the dharmas” is the attachment to the false view that the dharmas truly exist even though they are provisional and arise from dependent origination. “Self-attachment” is the attachment to the false view of a truly existing self, which in fact arises from the Four Great Elements and Five Aggregates. By comparison, attachment to dharmas is smaller in scope. Both attachments are in essence the view or belief that there is a real self (*satkāyadr̥ṣṭi*), but due to differing attributes they develop into two separate obstacles. Once these obstacles are removed, we will be able to achieve enlightenment. See Venerable Tzu Yi, ed., *Fo Guang Dictionary of Buddhism* (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Publishing House, 2002), 2940.
- 33 “Ignorance and afflictions” (Skt. *avidyā*) means being unable to understand reality, i.e., a state in which the truth of things is hidden, and where one cannot penetrate and understand it. In other words, this state of ignorance is due to an inability to penetrate, comprehend, and understand [the true nature of things], and generally entails qualities of foolishness, stupidity, desire, anger, and ignorance. It also specifically refers to a kind of secular understanding unable to comprehend the ultimate truth. It is also the link of “ignorance” in the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, which in that schema represents the root of all afflictions. According to the *Āgamas*, ignorance is the false understanding of Buddhist principles of truth (the Four Noble Truths), and is intricately tied to desire. Refer to *Fo Guang Dictionary of Buddhism*, page 5094. See Venerable Tzu Yi, ed., *Fo Guang Dictionary of Buddhism* (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Publishing House, 2002), 5094.
- 34 Vasubandhu, “The Thirty Verses on Consciousness Only,” in *Three Texts on Consciousness Only*, trans. Francis H. Cook (California: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1999), 377-8.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 “Discontinuous birth and death” (Skt. *pariccheda-jarā-maraṇa*) is one of two types of saṃsāra, along with “transfiguration birth and death” (Skt. *parinamiki-jarā-maraṇa, pārīṇāmikī cyutiḥ*). Discontinuous birth and death has a predetermined life-span and physical body. This is the ordinary cycle of birth and death experienced by deluded beings, in contrast to the transfiguration birth and death of arhats and bodhisattvas who have extirpated delusions and are able to alter their physical body and lifespan. -Ed.
- 40 From the Buddhist perspective, there are two types of death: *acintya-pārīṇāmikī-cyuti* and *pariccheda-cyuti*. The former refers to rebirth within the Six Realms of Existence that ordinary beings undergo in the great sea of life and death, while the latter refers to the spiritual level of enlightened beings who can transcend life and death through their spiritual cultivation.
- 41 The *catvāro bhavāḥ* (four states of being) is evidenced in texts such as the *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣāśāstra*, *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra*, *Nyāyānusāriṇī*, and *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhiśāstra*.
- 42 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1962), 277.

- 43 *The Diamond Sutra*, trans. A. Charles Muller (http://www.acmuller.net/bud-canon/diamond_sutra.html, 2020). Retrieved on 13 March 2021.
- 44 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, “My Understanding of Humanistic Buddhism,” in *Studies on Humanistic Buddhism 1: Foundational Thoughts*, trans. Humanistic Buddhism Journal Translation Team (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism, 2018), 57 and 59.
- 45 Shih Cheng Yen, *Three Ways to the Pure Land: The Three Essential Principles for Cultivating Pure Causes* (Taipei: Jing Si Publications Co., Ltd., 2015). Retrieved on 14 March 2021 on <https://books.google.com.my/books?id=EMb3DwAAQBAJ&pg=PT170&lpg=PT170&dq=%22If+I+do+not+descend+into+hell,+who+will?%22>, pages unmarked. -Ed.
- 46 The above three phrases that the author uses in parentheses together form part of the opening of the *Heart Sutra*, the complete verse being “Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva while contemplating profoundly the *Prajñāpāramitā*, clearly saw that the Five Skandhas are empty and thus he overcame all ills and sufferings.” Translation from <http://fgsihb.org/dictionary-info.asp?id=13464>. -Ed.
- 47 *The Lotus Sūtra*, trans. Tsugunari Kubo and Akira Yuyama (California: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2007), 40. -Ed.

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