

**STUDIES ON
HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM**

**VENERABLE MASTER HSING YUN:
A LIFE REMEMBERED
緬懷星雲大師：人間佛教的思想與實踐**

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PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM: MIDDLE WAY AND NONDUALITY

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Abstract

This paper argues that “middle way and nonduality” provides the most coherent framework for understanding Humanistic Buddhism. While Cheng Gongrang frames Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s thought through skillful means and tensions between tradition and modernity, doctrine and practice, and self and society, this risks portraying Humanistic Buddhism as dialectical contradiction. Drawing on Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka philosophy and Huineng’s teaching that “Dharma is nonduality,” this article demonstrates how nonduality transforms apparent tensions into dynamic complementarities, offering both philosophical rigor and a constructive basis for interreligious dialogue, illustrated through Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s teaching “I am Buddha.”

I. Introduction

This paper argues that the concept of “middle way and nonduality” (中道不二) provides the most philosophically precise framework for understanding Humanistic Buddhism (人間佛教 / *renjian fojiao*). Cheng Gongrang (程恭讓), one of the leading scholars of this field, considers “skillful means” (善巧方便 / *upāya*) the core of Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s (星雲大師) thought.¹ Interpreting through the lens of skillful means, Cheng describes Humanistic Buddhism as defined by “tensions” (張力) between tradition and modernity, doctrine and practice, and personal cultivation and social engagement. In this paper, I explore that while Cheng’s framework captures important dimensions of Humanistic Buddhism, it risks portraying it merely as a set of dialectical contradictions. Moreover, it creates challenges for interreligious and cross-cultural dialogue, where such tensions may be misread as irreconcilable.

I propose instead that a non-dualistic interpretation, grounded in Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka philosophy and Huineng’s teaching that “Dharma is nonduality” (佛法不二), offers a more coherent and practical basis for Humanistic Buddhism. Nonduality not only provides the philosophical foundation for skillful means, but also opens a constructive path for

dialogue, transforming tensions into dynamic complementarities rather than contradictions.

The paper proceeds in three steps. First, it examines Cheng's framework, highlighting both its insights and limitations. Second, it argues that the middle way and nonduality are more fundamental than skillful means, and that "nonduality" provides a clearer framework than tensions. Finally, it analyzes Venerable Master Hsing Yun's teaching of "I am Buddha" (我是佛) as a case study to demonstrate why the middle way and nonduality offer a more fitting and fruitful interpretive lens for Humanistic Buddhism.

II. Cheng Gongrang's Framework of Tensions in Humanistic Buddhism

The contemporary study of Humanistic Buddhism has been profoundly shaped by Cheng, who provides one of the most systematic accounts of its intellectual contours. In his book, *Studies on Venerable Master Hsing Yun's Humanistic Buddhism*,² Cheng identifies Humanistic Buddhism as a dynamic tradition marked not by static definitions but by what he calls tensions—sites of enduring dialectical contradiction that nevertheless sustain the vitality of the movement. In his analysis, Humanistic Buddhism cannot be reduced either to a charismatic vision or to a fixed doctrinal system. Rather, it is constituted through its continuous negotiation of internal and external pressures, a process that Cheng insists must be embraced rather than eliminated.

Cheng organizes these dynamics into four orientations, each of which embodies a particular set of oppositions: interpretative orientation (詮釋取向), traditional orientation (傳統取向), discursive orientation (論說取向), and value orientation (價值取向). Taken together, these orientations form the matrix within which Humanistic Buddhism unfolds. While Cheng's framework illuminates real and pressing challenges facing the movement, it also reveals certain limits. His emphasis on dialectical tensions risks portraying Humanistic Buddhism as inherently unstable or contradictory, rather than as a tradition grounded in a deeper nondual coherence.

1. Interpretative Orientation: “What the Buddha Taught” and “What People Need”

Cheng’s first category, the interpretative orientation, concerns the hermeneutical tension between “what the Buddha taught” (佛說的) and “what people need” (人要的). This reflects a broader dilemma in modern Buddhist reform: How to maintain fidelity to the canonical tradition while simultaneously responding to contemporary cultural and social demands. Cheng identifies an additional pair of terms here: The tension between “purification” (淨化) and “goodness and beauty” (善美).

For Cheng, this orientation highlights the interpretive labor required in translating ancient teachings for modern audiences. Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s advocacy of Humanistic Buddhism embodies this hermeneutical challenge: To communicate Buddhism in ways that are both faithful to the Dharma and relevant to everyday life. In this respect, Cheng’s insight is crucial. It underscores the fact that Humanistic Buddhism is not simply a matter of doctrinal preservation but an active engagement with shifting cultural expectations.

Yet the very way Cheng frames this orientation—as a tension—suggests a zero-sum logic. Either Buddhism is faithful to its textual sources, or it adapts to popular needs; either it insists on purification, or it affirms beauty and human flourishing. Such dichotomization risks obscuring the possibility of an integrative vision in which fidelity and relevance, purity and beauty, are not mutually exclusive but mutually informing.

2. Traditional Orientation: Between Indian and Chinese Buddhism

The traditional orientation identifies a second axis of tension, between Indian Buddhist traditions and their Chinese developments. Cheng sees Humanistic Buddhism as inevitably shaped by this historical bifurcation: It inherits Indian philosophical frameworks (such as emptiness, dependent origination, and the bodhisattva ideal) while also reinterpreting them through

Chinese cultural, ethical, and metaphysical categories.

Here, Cheng's analysis rightly calls attention to the hybrid character of modern Chinese Buddhism. Humanistic Buddhism is not a return to Indian original Buddhism, but a Chinese development deeply marked by Confucian, Daoist, and modern reformist influences. Cheng highlights how this dual inheritance generates productive tensions: Should Humanistic Buddhism align itself more closely with Indian canonical sources, or should it affirm its Chinese identity as a culturally embedded tradition?

The strength of Cheng's observation lies in showing how historical transmission is never neutral. At the same time, his characterization of the Indian-Chinese relation as one of tension risks reinforcing essentialist categories. It might suggest that Indian and Chinese Buddhism are fundamentally incompatible streams, rather than historically interwoven traditions whose interplay has always been constitutive of Buddhism's development. A non-dual perspective would instead emphasize that Humanistic Buddhism emerges precisely through the inseparability of Indian inheritance and Chinese innovation.

3. Discursive Orientation: Life Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism

Cheng's third axis, the discursive orientation, concerns the relationship between Life Buddhism (人生佛教) and Humanistic Buddhism. While often conflated, the two represent distinct interpretative frameworks. Life Buddhism, associated with Master Taixu (太虛), emphasizes personal spiritual transformation and the cultivation of a meaningful life in the face of suffering. Humanistic Buddhism, especially as articulated by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, extends this orientation to encompass broader social and cultural concerns, insisting that Buddhism must be lived in the human world (*renjian* / 人間) rather than confined to temples or abstract philosophy.

Cheng interprets the relationship between the two as one of discursive tension: Is Buddhism primarily about existential self-cultivation, or is it about

social transformation? The insight here is that Humanistic Buddhism has indeed developed through debate and contestation about its aims and scope. However, by casting the relation as one of competing discourses, Cheng risks flattening their interconnection. In practice, Humanistic Buddhism is not a rejection of Life Buddhism but its extension. Existential cultivation and social engagement are mutually dependent rather than mutually exclusive.

4. Value Orientation: Humanistic Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism

Finally, Cheng identifies the value orientation, which highlights the tension between Humanistic Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism. Humanistic Buddhism emphasizes ethical transformation at both personal and societal levels, but it does so in a way that often avoids direct political activism. Engaged Buddhism, by contrast, explicitly links Buddhist practice with social justice movements, advocating for structural change in political and economic systems.

Cheng underscores that this divergence of values creates a real tension within modern Buddhism. For some, Humanistic Buddhism may appear too inward-looking, insufficiently committed to systemic reform; for others, Engaged Buddhism risks politicizing the Dharma in ways that compromise its spiritual integrity. Again, Cheng's framing highlights a genuine debate within global Buddhist communities.

The limitation, however, lies in the assumption that these two orientations must be held in perpetual opposition. A middle way perspective would suggest that ethical cultivation and social activism are not rival paths, but two expressions of the same bodhisattva commitment. Humanistic Buddhism's emphasis on personal transformation can serve as the very foundation for broader engagement, while Engaged Buddhism's social concerns can be seen as the natural extension of inner cultivation.

5. Cheng's Critique of Nonduality

Cheng is explicit in rejecting the concept of nonduality as an adequate framework for analyzing Humanistic Buddhism. He is concerned that appealing to nonduality risks oversimplifying the tradition and obscuring the genuine conflicts and dialectical contradictions that shape it. To address this, Cheng adopts the framework of tension to interpret Humanistic Buddhism. In his view, tension not only captures conflict or opposition but also conveys dialectical engagement, balance, integration, and vitality. Importantly, Cheng's use of tension leans more toward this positive, dynamic understanding rather than merely highlighting discord. He argues that, compared with nonduality, the tension framework better reflects the modern character and practical adaptability of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's Humanistic Buddhism.³

This caution is not without merit. Nonduality, when superficially invoked, can indeed function as a vague harmonizing principle that erases real differences. Cheng's resistance reminds scholars that Humanistic Buddhism must be attentive to the complexities of modern life, not reduced to a metaphysical slogan.

Yet Cheng's dismissal of nonduality also exposes the limits of his framework. By prioritizing tension over integration, his model risks portraying Humanistic Buddhism as permanently unstable—a tradition defined more by contradiction than by coherence. Moreover, by refusing the language of nonduality, Cheng cuts Humanistic Buddhism off from one of the deepest resources of Buddhist philosophy itself: Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamaka* vision of the middle way and Huineng's Chan affirmation that "Dharma is nonduality."

6. Insights and Limits of the Tension Model

Cheng's framework of four orientations provides a powerful descriptive tool for understanding Humanistic Buddhism. It draws attention to the hermeneutical, historical, discursive, and ethical challenges that shape the movement. His insistence that these oppositions be embraced rather

than resolved underscores the dynamic, evolving character of Humanistic Buddhism in the modern world.

At the same time, the “tension model” has significant limitations. By consistently framing these orientations as enduring dialectical tensions, Cheng risks depicting Humanistic Buddhism as a tradition of perpetual instability rather than as a coherent philosophical project. In particular, his rejection of nonduality forecloses the possibility that the very tensions he identifies are not contradictions to be endured, but expressions of a deeper nondual structure. From the standpoint of the middle way, what Cheng interprets as competing forces can be re-read as complementary dimensions of a single, integrated vision.

III. Why Nonduality is a More Precise Framework than Tension

Cheng’s account of Humanistic Buddhism as a constellation of persistent tensions has the virtue of descriptively capturing real conflicts in modern Buddhist life—between fidelity and relevance, Indian and Chinese lineages, inward cultivation and social action. Yet as a philosophical lens, the tension model remains essentially negative and descriptive. It names oppositions without supplying an underlying ontology or soteriology that explains why those oppositions are meaningful, nor how they might be held together coherently. By contrast, the classical Buddhist doctrine of nonduality, most powerfully articulated in Nāgārjuna’s *Madhyamaka* and in Huineng’s Chan, provides both the metaphysical and practical resources to reconceive Cheng’s oppositions not as irresolvable contradictions, but as interdependent aspects of a single, dynamic whole.

1. Nāgārjuna and the Two Truths Logic

Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK) reframes philosophical disputes by exposing the ontological error underlying dualistic thinking. His crucial methodological contribution lies in the doctrine of the two truths: Conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) are

not separate realms, but mutually implicated aspects of the same reality. As Nāgārjuna states in *MMK* 24:9–10,

Those who do not understand the distinction drawn
between these two truths, do not understand the
Buddha's profound truth.

Without a foundation in the conventional truth, the
significance of the ultimate cannot be taught. Without
understanding the significance of the ultimate,
liberation is not achieved.⁴

This is not a mere harmonizing platitude. It implies a rigorous epistemic stance. Distinctions that appear sharp at the level of language and practice (e.g., doctrine vs. application; Indian vs. Chinese forms) are *conventionally* operative and pragmatically indispensable, yet *ultimately* empty of self-subsistent status.

Applied to Cheng's list, the Madhyamaka insight shows that the tensions he emphasizes are expressions of dependent origination. Each pole presupposes the other. "What the Buddha taught" acquires meaning in relation to "what people need"; Indian philosophical categories achieve their efficacy only insofar as they are rearticulated in Chinese social and linguistic contexts. Thus, Nāgārjuna's framework does not eliminate the discursive or historical differences Cheng catalogues, rather it locates them within a theory that both explains their necessity and relativizes their ontological primacy.

2. Huineng and the Praxis of Nonduality

Nāgārjuna supplies the metaphysical scaffolding; Huineng provides the experiential, praxis-oriented corollary. In the *Platform Sūtra*, Huineng stresses that the awakened perspective dispels the illusion of separation:

Good friends, in the Dharma there is no sudden or

gradual, but among people some are keen and others dull. The deluded recommend the gradual method, the enlightened practice the sudden teaching. To understand the original mind of yourself is to see into your own original nature. Once enlightened, there is from the outset no distinction between these two methods; those who are not enlightened will for long *kalpas* be caught in the cycle of transmigration.⁵

This statement places a central pedagogical point in the foreground: Nonduality is not an abstract ontology, but a mode of seeing that reconfigures how doctrine and life interrelate. For Huineng, to realize nonduality is to see clearly into one's own mind, i.e., Buddha-nature. Then, the person may discover that practice *is* the doctrine in embodied form; conversely, doctrine is an instrument for clarifying and deepening practice.

Seen from this vantage point, the life/social and doctrinal/practical axes that Cheng treats as opposing are better read as *two expressions of one path*. The tension between Humanistic Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism, for example, dissolves when one recognizes that social action can itself be a form of bodhisattva praxis—ethical engagement grounded in insight into interdependence—and that contemplative cultivation can and often does produce social responsibility.

3. Reframing Cheng's Four Orientations through Nonduality

To be concrete, nonduality reinterprets Cheng's four orientations as complementary poles rather than antagonistic forces:

- Interpretative orientation: The “what the Buddha taught / what people need” polarity is collapsed into the Mahāyāna pedagogical principle of *upāya* (skillful means) understood within a Madhyamaka frame. Teachings are provisional, responsive expressions tailored to conditions; their legitimacy is grounded in dependent origination,

not in rigid textual literalism.

- Traditional orientation: The Indian / Chinese divide becomes a tectonic interaction: Indian philosophical instruments (e.g. emptiness) function within Chinese cultural vessels. Nonduality affirms that cultural expression and doctrinal insight are interdependent, each informs and transforms the other.
- Discursive orientation: Life Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism are successive and overlapping discourses. A nondual lens shows that existential cultivation and social application are sequentially and dialectically related moments of the same praxis.
- Value orientation: Humanistic and Engaged Buddhism are differentiated emphases of the same bodhisattva ethic. Nonduality provides the conceptual basis for seeing personal transformation and sociopolitical engagement as mutually enabling.

This reframing is not merely terminological. It supplies explanatory purchase. Where Cheng's model leaves us with tensions to be managed, a nondual account explains *why* management is possible and *what* counts as appropriate management, namely, skillful context sensitive responsiveness grounded in insight into interdependence.

4. Addressing the Objection: Does Nonduality Obliterate Real Differences?

Cheng's hesitation about invoking nonduality is understandable. Used loosely, the word nonduality can become a metaphysical balm that papers over differences, erasing the stakes of historical conflict and political choice. But a robust Madhyamaka-Chan nonduality is not a flattening ontology; it is a disciplined hermeneutic that preserves conventional distinctions while denying their ultimacy. The two truths doctrine precisely allows for the maintenance of functional, normative differences at the conventional level—

hence preserving the ethical and institutional work Cheng insists upon—while offering an ultimate critique of reification. In practice, this means one can insist on rigorous textual scholarship, cultural integrity, or political solidarity without elevating any of these to absolute status.

Crucially, nonduality furnishes a normative criterion missing from the tension model. Where tension only diagnoses, nonduality guides. It indicates that the proper response to oppositions is not capitulation to compromise nor rigid assertion, but skillful means exercised from an insight into interdependence. In this way skillful means is not an ad hoc toolkit, but the ethical and epistemic expression of nondual wisdom.

5. Implications for Interreligious and Cross-Cultural Dialogue

Finally, nonduality has practical import for dialogue. The tension model can harden interlocutors into identity camps; nonduality invites translational humility. If doctrines and practices are seen as conventionally functional rather than ultimately absolute, interlocutors are equipped to negotiate differences without losing philosophical footing. This makes nonduality not merely an internal interpretive device but a resource for global engagement, precisely the kind of conceptual grounding a contemporary Humanistic Buddhism needs if it is to speak credibly across cultures.

Cheng's tension model remains an invaluable descriptive account of the lived complexity of Humanistic Buddhism. Yet for theoretical clarity and practical guidance, nonduality—grounded in dependent origination and the middle way—provides a deeper, more generative framework. It preserves conventional differences while explaining their interdependence, situating skillful means within an intelligible philosophical horizon. The next section will show how this nondual reading operates in practice by examining Venerable Master Hsing Yun's famous formulation "I am Buddha," and how that claim exemplifies middle way nonduality in doctrinal, pedagogical, and institutional terms.

IV. Venerable Master Hsing Yun's "I am Buddha": Problems, Strategies, and a Nondual Reading

Humanistic Buddhism inspires us to elevate and have faith in ourselves because this self embodies the wisdom and virtue of the Buddha. Thus we must realize that we are all Buddhas and be proud to say that "I am a Buddha." Such is the spirit of Humanistic Buddhism. Instead of placing our fate in the hands of divine entities, we should take responsibility for our own lives. The saying in the *Āgamas*, "Rely on the self, rely on the Dharma, rely on nothing else," is a rendition of the faith of Humanistic Buddhism.⁶

Venerable Master Hsing Yun's bold affirmation "I am Buddha" poses an immediate set of philosophical and practical questions, especially when read against Cheng's claim that skillful means (*upāya*) is the organizing core of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's thought, and when placed in the context of interreligious conversation. Does Venerable Master Hsing Yun mean to assert that every human being is literally a Buddha? If so, how does that square with other, more cautious statements, both in Chan texts (which insist some are "dull" and some "sharp"), and even in Venerable Master Hsing Yun's own corpus (where he sometimes warns that not everyone will become a Buddha without effort)? And finally: How should we interpret "I am Buddha" in a way that is philosophically coherent and useful for cross-cultural dialogue? This section answers these questions in three ways: (1) Reading "I am Buddha" as an *upāya* anchored in Chan's indirect pedagogy; (2) Showing why such *upāya* only makes sense within a doctrine of nonduality; (3) Arguing that the most defensible metaphysical account of that "Buddha" is emptiness (*śūnyatā*) as the philosophical correlate of dependent origination.

1. “I Am Buddha” as *Upāya* and Chan’s Pedagogy of Indirect Communication

Read without context, “I am Buddha” easily appears ontological and universalizing, and thus ripe for misunderstanding in interreligious settings. But within the rhetorical economy of Chinese Chan, paradox, provocation, and deliberate ambiguity are standard pedagogical tools. Chan has long cultivated a pragmatics of “never tell too plainly” (不說破). Teachers deploy paradoxical assertions, poetic sayings, and direct challenges precisely to jolt students out of conceptual fixation and toward immediate insight. The literature on Chan communication stresses this as a systematic, purposive strategy rather than mere rhetorical play. As Youru Wang puts it, Chan’s indirectness is a “pragmatics” designed to disrupt habitual conceptual frames and provoke first-person recognition.⁷

Seen this way, Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s “I am Buddha” functions as a canonical *upāya*: It is an exhortation, an identity predicate offered to practitioners as a means to induce moral responsibility, ethical comportment, and experiential self-inquiry—not an empirical thesis about metaphysical ontology. Cheng’s emphasis on skillful means in Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s thought underscores this point: For Cheng, Venerable Master Hsing Yun deliberately re-works classical *upāya* so that profound soteriological claims are expressed in idioms that contemporary persons can enact and live.

2. *Upāya* Becomes Intelligible only within a Nondual Frame

However, treating “I am Buddha” as mere motivational rhetoric is incomplete unless we also account for its doctrinal rationale. Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s repeated insistence that “Humanistic Buddhism rests on dependent origination and the middle way” signals precisely that rationale: The *upāya* is meant to point practitioners toward a realization in which the conventional “I” is not ontologically independent from Buddha-reality. As mentioned previously, Nāgārjuna’s *Madhyamaka* famously argues that conventional and ultimate truths are not separate—that the ultimate cannot be taught apart

from the conventional—and this is precisely what allows pedagogical devices to carry ontological weight without becoming metaphysical claims about a substantial self.

Huineng's *Platform Sūtra*, the classic Chan articulation of nonduality, makes the link explicit in language that resonates with Venerable Master Hsing Yun's praxis: Dharma is nonduality; the mind is likewise non-dual [...] the mind by nature is pure, and there is nothing to grasp or abandon. That language supplies the hermeneutical key: *Upāya* statements like "I am Buddha" are not empty self-exaltations, but invitations to recognize the nondual nature of mind, and to cease reifying the dichotomy between ordinary self and Buddha.

This helps resolve an apparent inconsistency in Venerable Master Hsing Yun's corpus. He affirms the universal potential that "everyone has the Buddha-nature" while warning that not everyone will in fact become a Buddha without practice and moral transformation.

While it is said that everyone has the Buddha-nature, faith nevertheless differs amongst individuals. For example, differences in depth, level of transcendence, elevation, and breadth of one's faith. In fact, though faith is sacred, the levels of devotion, transcendence, and potential still differ. Just as the functions of different brands of microphones vary, it is also natural for some to fall behind in energy and devotion to faith. This is likewise altogether normal.⁸

Read through a nondual lens, the two claims are complementary: Buddha-nature (the ontological potential) and the empirical requirement of moral and cognitive transformation (the pragmatic condition) are not contradictory. The first is a soteriological diagnosis (potential), the second a realistic appraisal of praxis (practice required). Venerable Master Hsing Yun both motivates (with *upāya*) and disciplines (with ethical realism).

3. What is “Buddha-nature” Ontologically? Emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) as the Safest Interpretive Move

If “I am Buddha” is to be philosophically defensible beyond rhetorical efficacy, we need an account of what “Buddha” denotes. One robust way to read Buddha-nature in a manner consistent with both Madhyamaka and Chan is as an expression of emptiness grounded in dependent origination. Madhyamaka denies any intrinsically existing self or substrate; yet it also affirms the conventional efficacy of compassion and wisdom. The two truths doctrine thus yields a nondual picture in which emptiness (no inherent self-nature) and dependent arising (relational constitution) together explain how “Buddha” can be spoken of as present in a person without implying a substantial, eternal self. Nāgārjuna’s treatment of the two truths shows that emptiness and relative functioning are not opposites, but mutually implicated; this is the philosophical scaffolding for interpreting Buddha-nature as emptiness.

Recent scholarship on *tathāgatagarbha* (如來藏) emphasizes that many East Asian interpretations understand Buddha-nature as a positive expression of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), rather than as a substantial self (*ātman*). In his article, “The Significance of *Tathāgatagarbha*: A Positive Expression of *Śūnyatā*,”⁹ Heng-Ching Shih argues:

The *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine is employed as a skill-in-means (*upāya*). This does not necessarily mean that the theory of *tathāgatagarbha* is *neyārtha*—a teaching requiring further qualification—but that it is taught to suit the needs of particular audiences and circumstances. Hence, as the *sūtra* states, in order to teach the emptiness of all dharmas, the Buddhas sometimes preach through the doctrine of *tathāgatagarbha* and sometimes through that of emptiness. It is therefore more appropriate to take *tathāgatagarbha* or Buddha-nature as

representing a “profound existence” derived from “true emptiness,” rather than as a monistic self.¹⁰

The prevailing interpretation in contemporary scholarship thus treats *tathāgatagarbha* language as a pedagogical and positive expression of the empty yet luminous ground of experience—an understanding that supports Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s rhetorical use of Buddha-nature while avoiding ontological reification.

4. Implications for Inter-religious Dialogue

Three practical lessons follow. First, treating “I am Buddha” as a context sensitive *upāya* removes the immediate threat of doctrinal absolutism in interreligious settings: It becomes a moral and existential provocation rather than a metaphysical claim that would collapse religious distinctions. Second, situating Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s rhetoric within Madhyamaka and Chan nonduality shows that his language is philosophically disciplined, not an *ad hoc* egalitarianism, but an appeal to a carefully articulated view of dependent origination and emptiness. Third, this reading shows that Cheng’s portrayal of Humanistic Buddhism as primarily a realm of persistent tensions is not necessary. If the orientations Cheng identifies are understood as dynamic expressions of nonduality, rather than as enduring dialectical tensions, we arrive at a more integrated and philosophically coherent account—one in which skillful means serves as the method, while the middle way and nonduality provide the metaphysical framework that grounds it.

In short, Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s “I am Buddha” works as *upāya* within Chan’s pedagogy. Its justificatory force depends on a nondual reading of Dharma that links dependent origination to emptiness. Once so framed, the statement becomes a disciplined, socially potent exhortation rather than an empty platitude or an ontological overreach.

V. Conclusion

This paper reconsiders the philosophical foundation of Humanistic Buddhism by critically engaging Cheng's influential model of tensions. Cheng identifies four orientations: interpretative, traditional, discursive, and value—arguing that Humanistic Buddhism is shaped by enduring dialectical tensions between doctrine and practice, Indian and Chinese traditions, personal cultivation and social engagement. While insightful, this tension model risks reducing Humanistic Buddhism to a perpetual balancing act of contradictions.

By contrast, I argue that the more precise and doctrinally grounded framework is middle way and nonduality, rooted in Nāgārjuna's philosophy of dependent origination and emptiness, and Huineng's teaching that "Dharma is nonduality." Through a close reading of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's provocative affirmation "I am Buddha," this article explains that Humanistic Buddhism is not trapped between polarities, but integrates them as interdependent dimensions of practice. "I am Buddha" functions both as skillful means and as a nondual recognition of intrinsic Buddha-nature, understood not as substantial essence, but as emptiness itself.

In conclusion, this article contends that middle way and nonduality provide a philosophically consistent and practically transformative vision of Humanistic Buddhism—one that bridges doctrine and daily life, self-realization, and social engagement, as well as offering a resource for meaningful interreligious dialogue today.

Notes

- 1 程恭讓, "善巧方便: 星雲大師人間佛教思想核心," 人間通訊社 (The Life News Agency), June 29, 2021, <https://www.lnnews.com/news/137115> (accessed October 6, 2025). Cheng's statement that Venerable Master Hsing Yun developed Humanistic Buddhism through "a dialectical unity (辯證統一) of *prajñā* wisdom and skillful means" is problematic. The term dialectical unity is rooted in Hegelian philosophy, implying a triadic movement of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. This framework suggests that *prajñā* (wisdom) and *upāya* (skillful means) stand in opposition yet are ultimately reconciled in a higher synthesis. However, such a formulation misrepresents the Buddhist perspective. In Mahāyāna thought, *prajñā* and *upāya* are not opposites that

require synthesis, but rather mutually inclusive and interdependent—non-dual (不二) aspects of the same realization. Describing their relationship as non-dual rather than dialectically unified more accurately captures the spirit of Buddhist philosophy and avoids imposing a Western metaphysical framework on an inherently different conceptual system.

- 2 程恭讓, 《星雲大師人間佛教思想研究》(高雄: 佛光文化, 2015).
- 3 Cheng Gongrang, *Studies on Venerable Master Hsing Yun's Humanistic Buddhism* (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2015), 415. 程恭讓, 《星雲大師人間佛教思想研究》(高雄: 佛光文化, 2015), 415.
- 4 Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, trans. Jay Garfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 298.
- 5 Huineng, *Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch*, trans. Philip Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University, 2012), 137.
- 6 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intents of Buddha*, trans. Venerable Miao Guang (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2016), xv.
- 7 Youru Wang, "The Pragmatics of 'Never Tell Too Plainly': Indirect Communication in Chan Buddhism," *Asian Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (2000): 7–31.
- 8 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intents of Buddha*, trans. Venerable Miao Guang (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Monastery, 2016), xvi–xvii.
- 9 Heng-Ching Shih, "The Significance of 'Tathagatagarbha': A Positive Expression of 'Sunyata'" BuddhaSasana: A Buddhist Page by Binh Anson, <https://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebdha191.htm> (accessed October 2, 2025).
- 10 Ibid.