Humanistic Buddhism and the Modernization of Buddhism

Lai Yonghai
Director of the Chinese Culture Institute, Nanjing University
b. 1949

Lai Yonghai holds a PhD in Philosophy and is currently a full professor in the Department of Philosophy at Nanjing University. He also holds appointments as PhD supervisor and as a director of the Jianzhen Library. Professor Lai’s academic achievements are exceptional and are renowned both in his native homeland and abroad. There are three major aspects to his accomplishments: firstly, Professor Lai has published prolifically; secondly, he has served as chief editor of professional periodicals and academic journals; and, thirdly, he has published over a hundred research papers in national and international academic journals. His major works include: On Chinese Theories of Buddha Nature, A Discussion On Chinese Buddhist Culture, and sixteen other publications. Professor Lai was chief editor of other works such as: A Comprehensive History of Buddhism in China, and Thirteen Buddhist Sūtras, among others.
In recent decades, rapid economic, scientific, and technological development has modernized human society in leaps and bounds. Hence, societies and cultures face the dual issues of how best to treat one’s tradition and how to adapt to the reality of a changing society. If a given tradition is the modernized “medium” (i.e. carrier of specific ideas) of its ideology, then the social conditions under which it operates form the “foundation” (i.e. the direction and strategy) for its modernization.

Similar to other religions, Buddhism as a social system also faces the questions of whether or not to modernize, and how best to undergo this process in today’s society. Generally speaking, people will not object to the modernization of Buddhism, but may have different opinions regarding how to transform it. Therefore, this article puts forward some tentative suggestions on how Buddhism should modernize. It awaits responses from learned scholars and the virtuous on its shortcomings.

1. Buddhism Should Modernize by Affirming Life

How should Buddhism be modernized? What kind of path should contemporary Buddhists be taking? The first issue to resolve is the subject to be modernized. The teachings of Buddhism should be modernized, but Buddhism should retain the fundamental spirit of its core doctrines. As such, we should first clarify the fundamental essence of Buddhism.

The spirit of Buddhism focuses on the concern for life. There is probably no one who would object to this since Buddhism’s focus is, without exception, concerned with the problems of life. This is true irrespective of the subject of our discussion, be it—early Buddhism, or the subsequent Mahāyāna Buddhism, Northern Buddhism, Southern Buddhism, Indian Buddhism, Chinese, Japanese, or Southeast Asian Buddhism—Śākyamuni’s founding of Buddhism originated from his contemplation and concern for the problems of life.

Because sentient beings view this illusory and causally created body composed of the Five Aggregates as truly existent, they cling to the concepts of self and others. Thus, the causes of suffering such as birth, aging, sickness, and death are produced. Buddha’s main objective in founding Buddhism was to liberate sentient beings from the endless repetition of birth and death in this sea of suffering. Suffering, the first of the Four Noble Truths spoken at the first turning of the Dharma wheel, is the expression of compassion towards the various pains suffered by sentient beings, while nirvāṇa is the ultimate aim
of their liberation. The two other Noble Truths, namely the “arising of suffering” and the “path to the cessation of suffering,” are, respectively, the investigation into the causes of human suffering and the method to be rid of them. Their purpose is the deliverance of sentient beings. Therefore, it is without doubt that the Buddha’s focus was on life when founding Buddhism.

Faced with a range of different social and historical factors in its subsequent development, there emerged different schools of thought and many forms of Buddhism. None, however, deviated from the focus on life. Without this focus, perhaps it would no longer be Buddhism. For example, Hīnayāna Buddhism focuses on self-liberation as its ultimate goal, but what it is trying to liberate from is life, even though it is only limited to life in the form of an individual. Mahāyāna Buddhism extends this scope and ascends to a higher level by advocating universal liberation and relieving the suffering of all beings, but it is trying to liberate life too. Whether we are discussing the “empty nature of causes and conditions,” advocated by the emptiness schools in Mahāyāna Buddhism, the “all phenomena manifest from consciousness” as discussed by the Faxiang School, or the “experience Buddha nature through practice” as emphasized by Chinese Buddhism, though the paths they take or the methods adopted are different, the ultimate goal is the same: to liberate sentient beings, especially humans, from the cycle of rebirth. Here we can see that traditional Buddhism has two notable features: firstly, it takes life as its subject and its focus; secondly, it regards life as a sea of suffering and characteristically rejects it, regarding liberation from the cycle of rebirth and reaching nirvāṇa as the ultimate goal. What, then, subsequently happened to this traditional spirit of Buddhism?

On a global scale, Hīnayāna Buddhism, which regards individual life as its subject and self-liberation as its objective, pales in comparison in its speed of development and strength of influence when put alongside Mahāyāna Buddhism, which rallies around universal liberation of beings with the aspirations of becoming bodhisattvas and buddhas. Secondly, “passive Buddhism,” which adopts the attitude of rejecting and abandoning, is gradually replaced by “proactive Buddhism,” which affirms the real value of life. Both these points can be powerfully illustrated in the historical development of Chinese Buddhism.

When Buddhism gradually moved eastward, both Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna Buddhism were simultaneously transmitted. However, after the latter’s dissemination
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into China, it ultimately did not grow into a position of dominant influence but instead has waned since the Wei and Jin dynasties. In contrast, when Mahāyāna Buddhism was introduced, it first built upon the xuanxue (metaphysical schools) of the Wei and Jin dynasties and then later integrated into Confucian doctrines on human nature and the mind. This resulted in Mahāyāna Buddhism becoming a dominant school of thought, standing together with Confucianism and Daoism like a tripod. This significant trend of social thought had an enormous impact on all aspects of Chinese society. The main reason for this was Mahāyāna Buddhism’s focus on the spirit of compassion and universal liberation, compared to Hīnayāna Buddhism’s focus on ideas of self-benefit and self-deliverance. The former better met the spiritual needs of the Chinese and was more readily acceptable to them. This phenomenon has been pointed out by earlier thinkers: the degree in which an idea spreads is determined by the degree of the social need for it. The fact that Mahāyāna Buddhism flourished in China and that Hīnayāna Buddhism did not demonstrates this point. The future development of Chinese Buddhism and its path to modernization cannot be like Hīnayāna Buddhism, where its focus is restricted to self-benefit and self-delivery, but instead it must be in line with the Mahāyāna spirit, which is characterized by an open-minded, popularized focus on the altruistic promotion of universal relief for all sentient beings.

There is another important fact in the history of Chinese Buddhism: the Chan School has become almost synonymous with Buddhism in China since the Sui and Tang dynasties. An in-depth study of Chan thought reveals that, at its core, it attributes all aspects of the Dharma, including of all Buddhas and sentient beings, to one’s mind and intrinsic nature. An issue arises here: the vague usage of the terms “individual mind” and “intrinsic nature” could confuse the differing meanings of “mind” and “nature” in Indian and Chinese Buddhism. To a certain extent, a solution is to take the terms “individual mind” and “intrinsic nature” discussed in the Chinese Chan School, and further refine them to “human mind” and “human nature.” This change is imbued with a “revolutionary” significance, so much so that later generations came to know Master Huineng’s transformation of traditional Buddhism as the “Sixth Patriarch’s Revolution.”

The essence of the “Sixth Patriarch’s Revolution” was by no means intended to merely change the designation of specific Buddhist terms, but more importantly to modify the substance of those terms. Specifically, Huineng employed “human mind” and “human
nature” to replace the traditional Buddhist meanings of “individual mind” and “intrinsic nature,” thereby summing up the human attributes of the Buddha, and at the same time turning humans into buddhas.

The idea of attributing Buddha nature to human nature, and further of transforming a human to a Buddha is widely evidenced in the Chan canonical texts. As a matter of fact, one of the basic tenets of the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch—“when deluded, a human; when awakened, a Buddha”—is the best expression of breaking down the boundaries between humans and Buddhas. After Huineng, his Dharma descendants spoke even more directly of buddhas being humans, humans being buddhas, and that humans and buddhas are no different. If readers have the opportunity to peruse the later Chan literary forms, such as gongan (koan), huatou (critical phrases), jifeng (sharpness of one’s response), and yulü (record of sayings), they will discover that what Chan masters were strenuously seeking turned out to be the “the treasure within oneself.” What the Chan masters called “the main protagonist” was in fact themselves. The greatest attainment of those thoroughly awakened Chan masters was nothing more than the realization that “Buddha is me” and “I am Buddha.” This situation was most vividly, clearly, and incisively described in a poem entitled “Awaken to the Path” by a nun in the Tang Dynasty. It reads:

Seeking spring all day but it cannot be found,
Straw shoes stepping on clouds in the mountain range,
Upon return, accidentally smelling the plum blossom,
Spring is evidently present on the branch tips.

The Buddha who could not be found by treading over the mountains and searching high and low turned out to be within her own intrinsic nature.

How did the idea of turning the Buddha into a human being and transforming a human being into a buddha vitalize the Chan School and make it so popular around the world? This involves a question of value orientation in life, which can also be considered the greatest difference between the Chan School and traditional Buddhism. The traditional Buddhist view of human life first regards the body as an insubstantial form of a combination of the Five Aggregates that arises from causes and conditions, and posits that all suffering originates from one’s grasping and attachment towards this illusory body. Therefore, it advocates the rejection and abandonment of the realities of life. While it
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is true that “dependent origination and inherent emptiness” are fundamental theories in Buddhism, they do not necessarily imply a rejection and abandonment of the realities of life. Other issues at play are those concerning skillful means, ultimate teachings, and teaching in accordance to the listener’s capacity. In the history of Buddhism, the inability to handle these issues satisfactorily often led Buddhism becoming “a religion of delivering and seeing off the dead” and unrelated to human life. As a result, Buddhism became increasingly distant from human life. Buddhism was then just Buddhism, human life was just human life. They were disconnected. Consequently, Buddhism began a painful period of decline. In the history of Chinese Buddhism, there were many eminent monks, virtuous people, and learned scholars who had a deep understanding of these issues and raised pointed criticisms. For example, Master Taixu, a modern Buddhist reformist, pointed out the separation from, and abandonment of, human life in Buddhism: “The waning of the Buddha’s teachings was a major cause of defilements and ailments of the world.”

This perspective of Master Taixu is very insightful and the reason for this is simple: given that Buddhism abandoned human life, human life would inevitably abandon Buddhism. As the German philosopher Ludwig Andreas von Feuerbach states in his analysis of the reasons for religion’s existence and development, should there be a divinity who is “high and mighty” to the extent of being “detached from the realities of life,” wholly unable to understand the emotions and desires of believers, who is unable to provide them with some form of benefit? If such a divinity possesses transcendental powers, there would be none to believe in and worship it. If a religion were to lose the very foundation of its believers, its further propagation is a futile discussion.

An important reformation the Chan School brought to traditional Buddhism is the adjustment of Buddhism’s attitude towards human life. It changed traditional Buddhism’s attitude of rejecting and abandoning life into one of positive affirmation of life’s value and purpose. From the Chan perspective, the relationship between humans and Buddha does not always remain unchanging, nor is there an unbridgeable gap between them; the difference being only between “deluded” or “awakened,” thus the saying: “When deluded a common mortal, when awakened a Buddha.” As such, what is important is not to blindly reject and abandon the realities of our life, but instead devote ourselves to getting rid of delusion and becoming awakened. On becoming awakened, sentient beings are Buddhas. This is equivalent to saying that sentient beings, who are equal to Buddhas,
have irrefutable value and purpose, and thus should not be rejected and abandoned but instead given positive affirmation. Such positive affirmation of life’s practical value and purpose results in people not seeking spiritual comfort and reliance upon distant future lives and nirvāṇa, but instead being in the present as “giving others faith, joy, hope, and convenience” in their everyday lives.

When viewed from either a historical perspective or in practical terms, the Chan School’s reformation was a success. Historically, the Chan School developed itself from being in the “opposition” and a fairly inconspicuous sect into one which was strongly supported by the highest political leaders and enjoyed equal importance alongside other major schools like Tiantai, Huayan, and Faxiang. It eventually replaced them as the “foremost great school under the heavens.” Although the reasons for this are multifaceted, the most fundamental reason is that its philosophy is most suited to the needs of the citizenry. Turning our gaze to the contemporary world, Chan is not only popular and strongly demanded in the East, but even Westerners, who have not traditionally been interested in Buddhism, have caught the “Chan fever.” Such phenomena, besides illustrating the vitality and adaptability of Chan Buddhism, make it hard to find a more convincing reason.

The above extensive discussion of the Chan School’s reformation, as well as post-reformation Chan’s historical and contemporary strength and dissemination, points the way and allows us to ask the question of which direction today’s Buddhist reformation should take. That is, what direction should today’s modernization of Buddhism take? At the very least, the Chan School’s development and popularization informs us and allows us to build and develop a modernized Buddhism. We can and should take the path akin to the Chan School’s affirmation of the value and significance of life’s reality. In other words, in our current age, a modernized Buddhism, which is capable of developing and spreading throughout China and the world, would be one which is energetic and positive, that affirms the value and significance of life’s reality.

In fact, modern Buddhism should adopt the philosophy of affirming life. Earlier, the modern Buddhist reformist Master Taixu already had a profound understanding of this and provided a clear discussion. In A Guide to the Buddha’s Teachings, Taixu mentions: “In our world today, people are concerned about the issues of life…upon this foundation, we should propagate and build up Buddhist studies, guiding people to its
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bright path and develop human life towards Buddhahood. Hīnayāna Buddhism distances the world, negates life and is unsuitable.” In the Discourse of the Truthful Reality of Humans Becoming Buddhas, Taixu also points out that: “mainstream Buddhism in the age of declining Dharma must be closely tied to the lives of people,” meaning that Buddhism should absolutely not repeat the previously chosen path of distancing itself from the human realm and withdrawing into the forests. As to Chinese Buddhism, Master Taixu took the point of view of philosophical culture and the Confucianists’ focus on human life to theorize and prove that modernized Buddhism had to take the path of being closely linked to, and affirmative of, the value of human life.

While Master Taixu’s concept of “Buddhism for human life” could be said to be largely theoretical. By putting it into practice, Venerable Master has elevated “Buddhism for human life” to a new stage. More than twenty years ago, Venerable Master Hsing Yun emphasized: “Dharma is the study of life” (Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s Lecture Series). He believes that “the primary spirit of the Dharma is to grow our integrity”—to teach us how to behave as humans. At the same time, Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s Humanistic Buddhism also pays great attention to closely integrating Buddhism and life, believing that “the greatest defect of Buddhism today is to separate itself from life.” He pointed out: “Dharma is everywhere in our daily life, it is present in our eating, dressing and sleeping.” Particularly worth mentioning is that in recent decades, Venerable Master Hsing Yun has further spread “Buddhism of human life” all over the world and brought it to a new stage in its development.

2. Modern Buddhism Should Take the Path of Proactively Engaging the World

Just as the value placed on an orientation toward life plays an influential role in the development of modern Buddhism, its fate will be significantly affected by the issue of whether to transcend or engage the world.

Founded upon its rejection and abandonment of life, traditional Buddhism, and especially Hīnayāna Buddhism, basically takes the stance of transcendence with respect to the issue of whether to transcend or engage the world, which led to Buddhism being constantly challenged and set back in the course of its later development. While we can say that Buddhism’s decline in India was due to particular social and historical conditions and was not simply a result of its transcendent approach, this proposition can be considered
an important reason why Hīnayāna Buddhism did not grow into a position of dominant influence in China. While we can say that the Chan School existed prior to the Sixth Patriarch Master Huineng, it was not able to develop more extensively due to its reclusive method of emphasizing retreating to remote areas and spiritual practice withdrawn from the world. In a similar vein, one of the major reasons for the vigorous development of Chan after Huineng is its spirit of engaging the world by seeking liberation within it.

We should take a leaf from the book on the history of Buddhism’s development in China. After Buddhism was transmitted to China, it was challenged and criticized for its attitude of abandoning and transcending away from the world; namely because these concepts contradicted Confucian values and threatened imperial rule. Initially, Buddhists frequently debated on the basis of dichotomies like “laity vs. ordained” and “householder vs. monastic,” and was of the opinion that householders or citizens should naturally act in accordance to cultural norms, while maintaining that monastics should retreat from the world and seek truths in seclusion. Even though such an approach provided the theoretical basis for Buddhism to survive, it limited Buddhism to being “monastic” in nature and if Buddhism were to not break out of this mold and participate in society, then its development would have been severely restricted in its contemporary form.

In view of historical China’s economic-political conditions and socio-historical background, many eminent monks and sagely scholars clearly recognized that if Chinese Buddhism were to follow in the footsteps of Indian Buddhism and adopt a transcendent attitude, not daring to step outside these set boundaries, then Chinese Buddhism could not develop further. They therefore proposed a more realistic and flexible approach, attempting to integrate Chinese Buddhism with Confucian values and imperial rule from a range of different vantage points. Their propositions are represented in the following aspects.

Firstly, based on a quote from Buddhist scriptures, “The Buddha appeared in this world for one great reason,” that being the Mahāyāna spirit of “compassionate universal liberation.” Chinese Buddhism asserted that faith should not only emphasize self-liberation but should also incorporate altruism and the alleviation of suffering for all sentient beings. Based on these ideas, the eminent monks and learned scholars during this period often advocated that Buddhist practitioners should not live obscurely in mountain valleys, hide from the secular world, dwell in caves, or cultivate in concealment and seclusion, but
rather they should come down out of the mountains and engage themselves in society to promote Buddhism to the world and popularize it amongst the masses.

Secondly, unlike Indian Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism does not overemphasize distancing itself from politics and worldly affairs. Instead, it was able to seek supportive affinities and provide skillful means for Buddhism’s propagation and dissemination by making use of the secular socio-economic and political conditions present in ancient Chinese society. For example, in view of the fact that ancient China was characterized by imperial supremacy, and that rule being above all, they clearly advocated that “Buddhism cannot propagate itself, only the emperor can make it flourish,” and “without relying on the head of the nation, it is difficult to establish Dharma endeavors.” The significance of such an approach to the propagation and development of Chinese Buddhism is strongly evidenced in the formation and development of several larger Buddhist schools like Tiantai, Faxiang, and Huayan. It takes little imagination to know that, without the powerful support of the Sui and Tang dynasties, and of rulers like from Emperor Yang of Sui, Emperor Taizong of Tang, and Empress Wu Zetian, the founding of unified nationwide Buddhist schools by Zhiyi (Chih-i), Xuanzang (Hsuan Tsang), and Fazang would have been almost impossible. Zongmi, a renowned monk of the Tang Dynasty, made a very thought-provoking statement in explaining that Buddhism must depend on the secular imperial rulers and ministers: “the teachings rest upon the shoulders of the rulers and officials; if disconnected from them, will religion prosper?” These few words not only reveal the interconnectedness between Chinese Buddhism and imperial rule, but also point out the “skillful means” for the development of Chinese Buddhism—albeit one which is considerably pragmatic.

Thirdly, Chinese Buddhism had been able to develop relatively smoothly because of its better handling of the mutual relations between Buddhist Dharma and this-worldly matters. On this issue, there are two aspects to its success. One was to make suitable adjustments to the mutual relations between Buddhism and traditional Chinese ethics and moreover, not only making Buddhism amenable to such traditional values but to also assist these entities in Buddhist teachings. For example, Chinese Buddhism after the Sui and Tang dynasties not only highly promoted filial piety, but also “counselling court officials to be loyal...counselling nations to be properly governed and counselled families to be harmonious.” Two, Chinese Buddhism was adept at meeting the needs of
worldly matters, for example, speaking of “governing the mind” and also “governing the state,” and so was able to logically integrate Buddhist “cultivation of the mind” with Confucian “administration of state affairs.” Just as Qisong, an eminent monk of the Song Dynasty, said, “Confucianism and Buddhism are both the teachings of the sages. They may come from different sources, but they end up on the same page on governance.” Thus, Buddhism was not only non-threatening to the prevailing political systems, but was in fact beneficial to the governance of the country.

On the issue of transcending or engaging the world, if other schools of Chinese Buddhism can be said to have responded with more specific views and practical approaches, then Chan has taken a very great step forward in this respect also: no longer limiting itself to specific views or practices, Chan raised the banner of the “Sixth Patriarch’s Revolution” and made this its fundamental philosophy. Just as Xuanjue sang in “Yongjia’s Song of Awakening”:

I travel across rivers and seas,  
treading mountains to look for teachers  
to guide me in Chan meditation,  
since knowing the Caoxi path,  
I know life and death are immaterial.

That is to say, after Huineng, life and death and nirvāṇa, as well as transcending and engaging the world, have been integrated together.

The crucial importance of properly dealing with the relationship between Buddha Dharma and this-worldly matters, and between transcending and engaging the world, can be seen from the twists and turns the development of Chinese Buddhism in recent and modern times has taken.

Due to various social, political and economic reasons, Chinese Buddhism ran into “its darkest period” in the recent era, as pointed out by some Buddhist scholars. During this period, except for a handful of monks and lay persons who were still struggling determinedly to “continue their wisdom-lives,” the rest of Chinese Buddhism had “almost left a blank page” (Sayings of Venerable Wuyan). What is the main cause of this situation? On this, renowned Buddhist reformist Master Taixu had a clear understanding and gave an in-depth analysis. He believed that one of the primary reasons why Buddhism had fallen
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into such a deteriorated state was that many monastics were doing cultivation in retreat away from the world or just making a living using Buddhism, thereby Buddhism not only disregarded society and disengaged from life, but increasingly distanced itself from the world. As a result, Buddhism and society became independent of each other. Such neglect of society by Buddhism resulted in the same neglect of Buddhism by society. This harsh reality made Master Taixu realize that without thorough rectification and reform of such attitudes of disengagement and retreat, Buddhism could hardly survive, let alone develop. Therefore, he proposed many reform initiatives like those expressed in his *On the Reform of the Saṅgha System*. Among these, Master Taixu raised the following with regards to Buddhism taking the path of engaging society, namely: the “bodhisattva path” with the core values of “sacrificing oneself to benefit others” and to “benefit all sentient beings,” advocating “Buddhism and Buddhist studies be discussed in terms that encompass other-worldly, this-worldly, absolute and mundane truths,” and that the “Chan School and all Dharma entirely underpins all virtuous Dharms whether other- or this-worldly…Dharma permeates other-worldly truth, but simultaneously benefits the this-worldly into the future indefinitely.” This calls on all of those who wish to practice the bodhisattva path to participate in various types of community work. For example, monastics could participate in cultural, educational and charitable work, while the laity could serve in politics, military, industry, and other endeavors in the workforce, etc., thus causing countries and societies to reap the benefits of the Buddha’s teachings.

As it turns out, Master Taixu’s calls for the reform of Buddhism were correct. Since then, the situation of Chinese Buddhism has improved. Inheriting the reforms of Taixu, the modern Chinese Buddhist community has elevated Chinese Buddhism to a new stage of development in recent decades. The philosophy of “purifying homeland, benefiting and giving joy to sentient beings” proposed by the mainland Buddhist community is in line with Master Taixu’s philosophy of “sacrificing oneself to benefit others” and “benefiting all sentient beings.” At the same time, the Taiwanese Buddhist community has done a great deal of work to reform transcendent Buddhism into one which is simultaneously transcendent and engaged with society, thereby leading to the great strides of Taiwanese Buddhism in recent decades. Eminent monastics, such as Venerable Master Hsing Yun, propose “engaging in worldly careers with a transcendent spirit,” which well reflects the spirit of Master Taixu’s reforms of Buddhism. These words of Venerable Master Hsing Yun
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are quite thought-provoking: “It is easy to be a householder but difficult to be a monastic! It is easy to be a monastic but difficult to be transcendent! It is easy to be transcendent but difficult to be engaged with society!” This philosophy of emphasizing both the transcendent and engaged approaches, and rationally integrating them undoubtedly had great significance in the Buddhism’s development in recent decades.

What can be revealed by looking back over the historical development of Chinese Buddhism, including developments in recent decades? Firstly, to build and develop modern Buddhism we absolutely should not backtrack to the direction of only speaking of self-liberation and focusing on spiritual cultivation in abandonment of the world. Instead, we should pay attention to engaging with and being involved in society, taking the path of benefiting others and relieving the world’s suffering. Secondly, Buddhism’s engagement with society is not entirely the same as those purely engaged in worldly matters. If we say that worldly matters discuss engagement with the world under the premise of totally negating transcendence, then modern Buddhism should speak of both transcendence and engagement, and be able to rationally integrate both. For example, by advocating “engaging in worldly careers with a transcendent spirit.” Thirdly, as a religion, Buddhism should maintain its relative independence. Worldly matters such as economics, politics, law, etc., focus on pragmatism, while Buddhism emphasizes and focuses on spiritualism. Therefore, modern Buddhism should not only “adapt to the trend of the times and act fittingly to the present capabilities and conditions,” but also maintain its fundamental spirit and relative independence. Only then will Buddhism be full of life and vitality.

3. Modern Buddhism Should Take the Path of Humanization

The term “humanization” mentioned here not only includes the dual aspects of Buddhism emphasizing and affirming life’s reality, as well as, social engagement and proactively participating in society, but also includes the deeper connotation of taking worldly matters as the foundation of all Buddha Dharma, and positing the purification of the human realm as the fundamental task and ultimate goal of Buddhism.

There is a pertinent philosophy shared by both the Chan School’s “Humanistic Buddhism” and Taixu’s Buddhism of Human Life; they both assert that we should not retreat from the world to seek the Dharma, emphasizing that worldly matters are also the Buddha Dharma. Huineng once said that “The Dharma is in the world, Apart from
this world there is no awakening. Seeking bodhi apart from the world is like looking for a rabbit’s horn.” Shenhui, a direct disciple of Huineng, also repeatedly emphasized that “Buddha exists if there is a world; Buddha does not if there is none.” The Southern School pursued the path of humanizing and secularizing the Dharma and achieved substantial development over a lengthy period. However, by the time of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Chinese Buddhism had deviated from the path of secularization, resulting in a period of unprecedented darkness. It was only after Master Taixu’s advocacy of Buddhist reforms that this trend was reversed, resulting in humanization being again injected into Buddhism. He repeatedly emphasized: “Worldly matters are Buddha Dharma, Buddha Dharma is not Buddha Dharma; knowing thus, one can read all scriptures and commentaries.” At that time, there was a group of monastics who also agreed that Buddhism should be reformed, holding the belief that “To study Mahāyāna Buddhism in abandonment of the world are Māra’s deeds.” A consequence of advocating this position was that Chinese Buddhism was brought back from the brink of death and its effects are apparent for all to see. As society entered the age of modernity, eminent monastics supportive of Buddhist reforms have continued to affirm this route of “humanization,” closely integrating increasingly more aspects of Buddha Dharma and worldly matters while unceasingly pushing Buddhism forward. This was done in various ways: some integrated the Dharma into daily life, positing that the two are inseparable; that daily life is Dharma and being human is being the Buddha. Others advocated that we pay equal attention to building our careers and propagating Buddhism by “engaging in worldly careers with a transcendent spirit” and “promoting Buddhism’s development through strong career and industry.” Yet others explain the Dharma from the perspective of daily living and employment activities, seeing worldly matters as the foundation of Buddha Dharma and pointing out that only by acting in accord with worldly matters will we be able to accumulate the resources for transcending the world. All the above helps Buddhism to be popularized, secularized and suitable for daily life; increasing the developmental space and expanding the social foundations of the faith.

Another implication of humanizing Buddhism is that it brings out the full benefit of its ability to purify human minds, establishing a Pure Land in the human realm as the fundamental task and ultimate goal of modern Buddhism.
Ancient China traditionally attached great importance to the educational function of religion. The phrase “education through spiritualism” refers to relying upon “spiritualism” (i.e. religion) to educate people. After its introduction to China, Buddhism gradually took the path of focusing upon purification of mind, encouraging education, promoting traditions, and benefiting national rule. It adopted many means to implement this, such as the “Five Precepts and Ten Virtues,” advising mankind to “do no evil,” raising the banners of “mental cultivation,” and “returning to simplicity.” Additionally, appealing to “benefit others and relieving mankind’s suffering”; doing all the above in order to best harmonize the contradictions between Buddhist philosophy and Confucian values drastically strengthened the educational function of the Dharma. Doing so concurred with the Buddha’s original intent for the compassionate relief of sentient beings’ suffering. This widely benefited the masses and was also warmly welcomed by all strata of society. This indeed brought great benefit of merit to individuals, the nation and society. It is also the reason for Buddhism’s determined progress since its introduction into the mainland over a millennium ago, despite being substantially criticized and denounced, with some even seeking to send it back to India, or political intrigues to weaken and restrict it (such as the destruction of Buddhism enacted by the three Wu and one Zong emperors). It suffices to say that what fundamentally decides the success of an ideology (including religion) is not individuals (or even social groups), but whether this ideology fulfills the needs of society.

History is a mirror. How should Buddhism develop as mankind enters the age of the modern society? What should Buddhism do to better meet the needs of the modern society and achieve a broader space for development? This largely depends on what Buddhism can provide for the modern society; that is, what kind of function and impact does it have towards society?

Due to rapid economic development, the material wealth of modern society has grown exponentially. With the continuous expansion of the commodity economy, all aspects of social life have been commodified. There are those who can even set aside morality and conscience to achieve pragmatic economic and political interests through deception, scheming against one another, harming others for personal gain and being unscrupulous. Such methods are all too common these days. As the saying goes, “as long as one benefits, there is no care for others’ life and death.” In such an era of obsessive material desire, what people need the most (and are therefore lacking) is the pursuit of
spirituality and purification of the mind. Given such conditions, what should modern Buddhism do? It goes without saying that we should meet the needs of the community in a timely fashion and adapt to the present capabilities and conditions, making the purification of mind and return to simplicity our fundamental mission. This in turn is what Buddhism has traditionally been able to do: “managing the mind” and “simplifying one’s nature.” Therefore, in recent times many well-versed eminent monks have regarded “planting the nine-grades of lotuses of the Western Pure Land across the impure land of our cosmos”; this is akin to “building the Humanistic Pure Land” as the ultimate aspiration in propagating the Dharma. One can say that this is in line with the fundamental spirit of Buddhism and an act in accordance with both truth and capabilities, adapted to the trend of development in this age. Its future is certainly limitless.

Notes
1 (永嘉證道歌)-Ed.