Foundational Thoughts

Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism, Taiwan
and
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The Harmonious Development Between Humanistic and Traditional Buddhism and its Issues

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As is widely known, Humanistic Buddhism is a new movement of teaching, understanding, and practicing modern Han Chinese Buddhism. It has developed rapidly and gained broad support in Mainland China and Taiwan. It has been very successful in Taiwan and has far-reaching influence wherever Han Chinese Buddhism spread. This is especially true of Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s philosophy and practice of it. Such achievements have reinvigorated Buddhism and signal the arrival of a new era in the development of Buddhism.

This new form of Buddhism displays a strong modern hue in its full-fledged adaptation to the fundamental characteristics of modern society and in the developmental trends presented during its historical transformation. It is therefore markedly different from traditional Han Chinese Buddhism. Accurately perceiving and proactively adjusting the relationship between Humanistic and traditional Buddhism is not only necessary for the development of Humanistic Buddhism, but also a major issue in the theory and practice of Chinese Buddhism as a whole.

1. Defining Traditional Buddhism

Just like the concept of Humanistic Buddhism, traditional Buddhism means different things to different people. The traditional Buddhism I refer to here is that which gradually emerged after the Song Dynasty and fully took shape during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The Republican era saw this mainstream model of Buddhism formed during the Ming and Qing Dynasties continue being adhered to and spread over a wide area. In contrast to traditional Buddhism, Humanistic Buddhism proactively integrates with contemporary social life and cultural trends in terms of its ideas, teachings, experience, organization, temples, and activities—thereby promoting the holistic transformation of Buddhism. This presents people with positive ways of living, vibrant ideas, a blossoming culture, refreshing ways of conducting ritual ceremonies, an easy-to-understand Dharma, well-coordinated organizations, an energetic vitality, and an expression of human nature, all in accord with the modern spirit. Humanistic and traditional Buddhism are a pair that represent the respective categories of modernity and tradition in Han Chinese Buddhism. Within this duo are significant problems that have confronted Chinese Buddhism during the last century and will continue to do so far into the future. Their relationship drives the trends in the development of Chinese Buddhism during the contemporary era.
There exists a gap between the ideology of traditional Buddhism and mainstream society. Traditional Buddhist ideology is disconnected from the reality of people’s everyday lives, exhibiting a degree of insularity and aloofness in maintaining its own purity and delighting in its self-satisfaction. In regard to its canon and rituals, it adheres strictly to the observance of traditional monastic rules, precepts, and spiritual practices—inhertiting and passing down ancient practices—thereby forming its own independent and isolated system. It is out of touch with mainstream knowledge and is seen as mysterious and dubious by outsiders. In terms of faith and religious experience, its transcendent attitude and sense of sacredness is strong, it’s religious experiences relate to a belief in gods and spirits, and the pursuit of nirvana is popular. As for temples, the dominant functions are to enshrine the buddhas and bodhisattvas, conduct morning and evening chanting, and hold services for the dead, thus neglecting the general needs of the laity. This closes off a means to engage in an interactive learning experience. From the aspect of spiritual practice, it focuses on meditation and chanting the Buddha’s name as a means to gain rebirth in the Pure Land, emphasizing religious practice and downplaying any cultural or social activities. For its organizational system, it clearly divides monastics and the laity. There is a lack of balanced collaboration within the fourfold assembly. Monastic rules form the basis of the system, which leads to an alienation from society. In comparison, Humanistic Buddhism has created a new atmosphere with distinctly modern characteristics. Nonetheless, both traditional and Humanistic Buddhism are part of Buddhism. There are no fundamental differences in their tenets or beliefs. Therefore, Humanistic Buddhism has been in harmonious development with traditional Buddhism since its birth.

2. The Harmonious Development of Humanistic and Traditional Buddhism

The harmonious development of Humanistic and traditional Buddhism can be observed through the following concepts.

First, from the perspective of its fundamental tenets and core beliefs, Humanistic Buddhism is not a newly established philosophy or religious belief system. It is the successor of traditional Buddhism. The two depend on and complement each other, are parts of one whole, and are one in the Dharma. It is because they are indistinguishable and share a mutual heritage that we can say Humanistic Buddhism is traditional Buddhism’s
adjustment to a new era and its ongoing transition. Its sight is set on achieving the positive effect of a better expression of Buddhism.

Second, from the perspective of the relationship between religion and society, Humanistic Buddhism maintains a posture of positive engagement, proactive adaptation, and enthusiastic assimilation into modern society that exemplifies the modernity of Buddhism. In contrast, while traditional Buddhism’s aloofness in maintaining its own purity is obviously insular, oppressive, and conservative, severely draining the vitality of Buddhism while limiting its social functions. Traditional Buddhism can serve—with its transcendent characteristics of stability, calmness, aloofness, and independence—as a reminder for Humanistic Buddhism in the course of its development. While Humanistic Buddhism is positive, flexible, outward-looking, and public, it should maintain Buddhism’s traditional transcendent and independent character. In this respect, we see that there can be harmonious development between Humanistic and traditional Buddhism.

Third, in the relationship between the sacred and secular, traditional Buddhism strongly emphasizes its sacredness, the pursuit of nirvāṇa, the use of superhuman powers, the karmic results reaped in future lives, and ritual and Dharma services, all of which reflect its suprarational characteristic and maintenance of a strong religious sacredness. Humanistic Buddhism is not a secular doctrine or practical movement beyond the sphere of religion. Instead, it is a religious and cultural phenomena or social movement which carries its own sense of sacredness. Unlike political parties or civil organizations, sacredness is its defining element. In this regard, Humanistic and traditional Buddhism should also be said to share a relationship of harmonious development.

Fourth, from the perspective of the relationship between life and death, traditional Buddhism places emphasis on death, while Humanistic Buddhism places emphasis on life. There is indeed a major difference between the two in this respect, but they are two sides of the same coin. Emphasizing death is one of the ways to deal with the problems of life, while emphasizing life inevitably requires doing the same for death. It is only by attending to both simultaneously that we can have complete “life care.” Of course, Humanistic Buddhism bases its emphasis on death as the foundation for an emphasis on life, and so it approaches death with a more open, positive attitude. In breaking through the limitations of traditional Buddhism, it reflects its modern character and realizes a great leap forward in Buddhism’s philosophy and practice with regards to life and death.
Humanistic and traditional Buddhism share a relationship of harmonious development in this respect.

Fifth, from the point of view of organizational systems, there are many relationships of harmonious development shared between Humanistic and traditional Buddhism. For example, in the monasterial system, traditional Buddhism attaches great importance to building temples to enshrine the statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas, leaving little space for human beings and even less for lay devotees or those interested in Buddhist culture. In contrast, in the process of expanding the function of monasteries, Humanistic Buddhism continues to preserve the basic function of enshrining buddhas and bodhisattvas, maintaining the sacredness evident in traditional monasteries. In terms of organizing adherents, in traditional Buddhism, the monastics assume leadership roles over the laity, enforcing a strict binary system within the fourfold saṅgha. The laity are basically excluded from the organizational system. On the other hand, Humanistic Buddhism stresses the importance of the role played by the laity. However, it continues to maintain the monastic system of the Triple Gem and stresses the core function of monastics. In terms of Buddhist activities, traditional Buddhism mainly confines monastics within the monasteries, with strict, tedious, mysterious, and even old-fashioned rules. Most of the tasks are carried out by monastics, with an emphasis on worshiping, chanting sutras, making offerings, and holding ceremonies for the deliverance of the dead. They care little for practical activities and even lesser for secular ones. On the other hand, Humanistic Buddhism continues to preserve the foundation of traditional Dharma activities while innovatively reforming it. Therefore, in terms of organizational systems, Humanistic and traditional Buddhism may seem to share a weaker relationship with regard to harmonious development in respect to each other, but the former continues to share the latter’s inextricable fundamental principles behind its push for reform. Humanistic Buddhism is simply applying these principles more broadly in order to serve more positive functions.

Sixth, from the perspective of religious resources, traditional Buddhism is still the mainstream religion in Mainland China. Buddhist monasteries, devotees, monastics, and the public at large still adhere to traditional Buddhism as the main expression of the cultural resources, religious economy, and social power of Mainland Chinese Buddhism. Although Humanistic Buddhism embraces the purpose of leading a new trend in Buddhism, it can neither afford to alienate itself from the overall basic atmosphere of
Buddhism nor lose the important religious resources provided by traditional Buddhism. Humanistic Buddhism should respect and inherit the legacy of the prevailing resources of traditional Buddhism, and at the same time take the lead in setting new Buddhist trends.

3. The Current Issues Facing the Harmonious Development of Humanistic and Traditional Buddhism

Issues remain with regard to the harmonious development of Humanistic and traditional Buddhism. The key issues are as follows:

First, the differences and connections between Humanistic and traditional Buddhism are not entirely clear. From the modern era to the present, many different views and modes of practice have emerged within Humanistic Buddhism. In addition, there is a great contrast between the historical background of the present age and the early modern period. There are also different understandings between scholars. Consequently, there has been no consensus to date on the concept of Humanistic Buddhism between academics, Buddhist practitioners, or in politics. Not only are its connotation and denotation unclear, there have also been attempts to replace this concept with, for example, Human-Oriented Buddhism, Engaged Buddhism, New Chinese Buddhism, etc. Therefore, our first and foremost task is to continue facilitating the discussion on the very concept of Humanistic Buddhism. A consensus needs to be reached based on a review of history and with respect to current practice. The generally agreed boundaries for the connotation and denotation will have to be defined. We should strive to define it more precisely and with greater agreement across the board. This will not only lead to a better grasp of the latest trend in Buddhism’s development, but also to clearer ideas about the development of Buddhism at a broader social level. On this basis, Humanistic Buddhism can interact with traditional Buddhism, and in this process, finally accomplish its goal of leading the modernization of Buddhism. Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s four fundamental tenets of Humanistic Buddhism and the four criteria of “that which was taught by the Buddha himself, that which is needed by human beings, that which is pure, and that which is virtuous and beautiful” provide the basic boundaries for the denotations of Humanistic Buddhism. On the basis of a sound understanding of his thoughts about Humanistic Buddhism and its application in Fo Guang Shan, the differences and connections between Humanistic and traditional Buddhism becomes even clearer.
Second, an agreement has yet to be reached concerning Humanistic Buddhism’s strengths and limitations, or even whether it is positive or negative. Distinctively different views and fierce debates continue to exist. On one hand, this results from a lack of sound understanding of the practices of Humanistic Buddhism. Consequently, there are differing views on the scope and progress of Humanistic Buddhism. On the other hand, because Humanistic Buddhism generally presents an image of watering down the element of sacredness, reducing its sense of mystery, and increasing its tendency towards modern rationality in its development, the result is raised suspicions among some people. This is especially true in Mainland China. Due to a lack of leadership with clarity of thought and outstanding virtue, the trend of Humanistic Buddhism is at risk of secularizing Buddhism. This in turn has caused disconnection and conflict between Humanistic and traditional Buddhism, and threatens the important link required for their harmonious development.

Third, especially in Mainland China, there have been immense gaps between the theory of Humanistic Buddhism—how it is propagated and practice—how it is applied. Looking at the situation in Mainland China, increasing numbers of monasteries, practitioners, and Dharma services simply continue to operate within the scope of traditional Buddhism. While the religious leadership and related governmental departments focus on increasing efforts into propagating Humanistic Buddhism, the reality is that Buddhism in the Mainland is still moving within the bounds of the traditional. This inconsistency is indeed strange. There is still a long journey in order to translate slogans into action, to change government-led movements into independent initiatives by the Buddhist community, and to convert expectations of the religious leadership into the believers’ self-awareness. Without addressing this issue, the self-reflection and transitioning of traditional Buddhism cannot truly begin, and harmonious development of Humanistic and traditional Buddhism cannot be effectively achieved.

Fourth, the past and present forms of Humanistic Buddhism should also be observed comparatively, so that the different historical backgrounds and purposes during these two periods can be accurately understood. In this way, the new purpose and characteristics of Humanistic Buddhism at present can be comprehended. Humanistic Buddhism is a reform of Buddhism in keeping with the tide of historical development within the special context of China during the modern period. At that time, China was poor and weak, bullied by external powers, and politically paralyzed internally by corruption and backwardness.
The national economy was a mess and people were struggling to survive, yet most people were still self-indulgent in their foolishness and selfishness. Revitalizing the country and awakening the public became the most important mission for the entire nation at that time. All resources were directed to this cause. Precisely under such circumstances, the pioneers of Buddhist reform like Taixu proposed the concept of Humanistic Buddhism. Such pioneers attempted to rescue Buddhism from its insularity and conservatism, with an entrenched focus on self-liberation and self-indulgence in spiritual powers. Instead, they envisioned that Buddhism had a proper role to play in advancing society and revitalizing the nation. Today, in both Mainland China and Taiwan, the economy is highly developed, material life is abundant, society is relatively stable, and politics are in a continuous process of improvement. This is very different from the early modern era of China. If one of the important functions of Humanistic Buddhism in the modern period was centered upon revitalizing the nation while strengthening its economy, then today’s post-boom Humanistic Buddhism may need to focus more on calming minds, uplifting lives, and establishing morals in the course of democratic progress. The comparison between the past and present of Humanistic Buddhism helps us understand the history of its development and grasp its current purpose as well as future direction.

Fifth, the depth and breadth of the interactions of Humanistic Buddhism across the straits is still extremely limited. The experience of Taiwan, and especially that of Fo Guang Shan, has yet to be widely propagated and studied in the Mainland. For various reasons, Taiwan has achieved immense success in building a Buddhist culture and incorporating Buddhism into people’s daily lives. Moreover, compared to that of the Mainland, social transition in Taiwan happened earlier and was more thorough. Therefore, the modernization of Taiwan’s Humanistic Buddhism is more evident, mature, and stable, having more potential for development. Although the interaction between the Buddhist circles across the straits has made important breakthroughs in the recent three decades, it has not reached a desired level due to the region’s political climate, due to the differences in religious policies, and due to other regulations. In some sense, Mainland Chinese Buddhism is more traditional while Buddhism in Taiwan is more modern. The deficit of broad and in-depth interaction between the two has directly compromised the harmonious integration of Humanistic and traditional Buddhism.

Sixth, although there have been tremendous changes in attitudes with regard to the
interaction between the Buddhist schools of the three major languages in this era of globalization, it is far from adequate. All three Buddhist schools are facing the same issue of transition. However, because there are multiple differences such as societal foundation, cultural background, and Dharma transmission, the three major schools have developed unique characteristics in adapting themselves to modern society. Engaged Buddhism, popular in South East Asia, differs from Humanistic Buddhism, while Tibetan Buddhism is rapidly entering millions of households in China as it maintains its strong sense of sacredness. Dialogue on the developmental experience of the three schools of Buddhism has yet to truly take place. In this era of Buddhist ecumenism, this is a significant impediment to the further propagation of Humanistic Buddhism in Chinese Buddhist cultural circles.

Notes
1 《觀音信仰的淵源與傳播》-Ed.
2 《古代印度觀音信仰研究》-Ed.
3 《世親大師傳》-Ed.
4 《真諦大師傳》-Ed.
5 In Chinese historical terms, the present period covers post-1949 and the modern period covers 1840 to 1949. -Ed.
6 人本佛教 -Ed.
7 參與佛教 -Ed.
8 新型漢傳佛教 -Ed.
9 The three major languages in which Buddhist texts were recorded are: Pali (and Sanskrit), Tibetan, and Chinese. These represent three schools of Buddhism: Tibetan, Chinese (northern tradition), and Theravada (southern tradition). -Ed.