

# Is Humanistic Buddhism a New Phenomenon or A Revival of the Original Intent of the Buddha?

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## Abstract

In general, scholars argue whether ‘Humanistic Buddhism’ is a systematic re-introduction of Buddhism that has already been in pre-modern China or a new methodical re-manifestation about the core tenets of the Buddha. Herein, this study will defend the view that Humanistic Buddhism can be considered as a revival of the original intent of Śākyamuni Buddha, albeit not a new phenomenon. In effect, by employing the comparative case-study methodology, the research has shown several key findings. Firstly, Humanistic Buddhism was deemed as a ramification of a contemporary movement in China during the early twentieth century. Secondly, Master Taixu and Hsing Yun carried out missionary work to generate a new strength, solidarity, and authenticity in society. Thirdly, based on the early Buddhist texts and doctrines, they advanced the so-called concept of ‘Humanistic Buddhism’ as a means of thriving in personal and societal well-being – in virtue of the notion, *rensheng fojiao* (‘Human Life Buddhism’); this has largely

been integrated with the central aspects of early Buddhism such as the Threefold Training (*thriṣiḱṣā*), the Four Immeasurables (*brahmavihāra*), the Ten Wholesome Deeds (*daśa-kuśala-karma*), and etc. However, this work is solely based on the selected teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism with special reference to China.

*Keywords:* Hsing Yun, Humanistic Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Master Taixu

### **Introduction**

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in Humanistic Buddhism in the avenue of research due to the diversity of scholarly debates. During the modern period of China, there was a political devastation and growth of intellectual climate; Buddhism has therein experienced a rather distinctive transformation in East Asia. (Ch'en 1964: 455-70; Chan 1958 [1957]: 107-16). On the grounds of this historical movement, as Travagnin (2022: 2) and Liu (2014: 175) examine, many scholars have argued whether Humanistic Buddhism is a systematic re-introduction of Buddhism that had already been in pre-modern China, or a new methodical re-manifestation about key tenets of the Buddha; or, it is a novel theoretical phenomenon that has recently been made available in Chinese Buddhism; or, it is an innovation of Buddhism that is to be aligned with modernity; or, it is an intellectual response of Buddhism to the drastic outcome of intellectual milieu that arose in early twentieth century of China; or, it is a new form of humanitarian activities, social activism, or civic engagement springing from the Buddhist discourses. On account of this controversial literature, this scrutiny will attempt to defend the thesis that Humanistic Buddhism can be considered as a revival of the original intent of Śākyamuni Buddha, albeit not a new phenomenon. Nevertheless, this work does not engage with

the vast corpus of Buddhist teachings, so it is solely based on East Asian Buddhism with special reference to China. The paper begins by critiquing Humanistic Buddhism in relation to the actual purpose of the Buddha; it will then look into the view of ‘*rensheng fojiao*’ (‘Human Life Buddhism’), and finally, the core concepts of Humanistic Buddhism compared with early doctrinal teachings.

### ***Humanistic Buddhism vis-à-vis original intent of the Buddha***

The first section will examine the core extent of Humanistic Buddhism compared with the main intention of Śākyamuni Buddha. At first sight, Humanistic Buddhism emerged in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong-Kong over the twentieth century – as a revolutionary movement in East Asian religious thought (Stapleton and Tao 2022: 312; Liu 2014: 175). As Pittman (2001: 40) and Daoru (2010: 171) elaborate, during the late Qing dynasty (1644-911), ‘Humanistic Buddhism’ was founded as a vigilant response to the disrupted socio-political and religious environment – with scholarly rendition of Chinese semantics, viz., ‘*rensheng fogio*’ (‘Human Life Buddhism’) and ‘*renjian fojiao*’ (Human Realm Buddhism’) (Travagnin 2022: 1). On the basis of Chinese scholarship, this far-reaching step of Buddhism in China was first coined by Master Taixu (1890-1947), and then it was adopted by Master Hsing Yun (1927-2023) (Thapa 2010: 4; Daoru 2010: 171). Accordingly, the fundamental goal of Humanistic Buddhism was to generate a new energy and hope for individuals to practise the Bodhisattva Path through the inner qualities, i.e., compassion, loving-kindness, altruistic-joy, equanimity, wisdom and suchlike – for the sake of societal well-being and universal salvation, rather than mere personal growth in the *Dhamma* (Lu 2023a: 258; Garfield 2015: 294). Further, as Lu (2023a: 259) points out, as a whole, Humanistic Buddhism is largely driven upon the three touchstones of Buddhist

teachings, viz., ethical or moral conduct (*śīla*), mental peace and clarity (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*) – in support of thriving spiritual practices in daily life.

To flesh out these lines, it is worth underpinning the deep insight shown by Master Taixu and Hasing Yun in this regard, respectively:

‘The Buddha was born in the human world. He practised cultivation in the human world. And, he became enlightened in the world. He lectured in the world. His whole life embodied the characteristics of Humanistic Buddhism. For forty-nine years, he offered more than 300 lectures. He did not speak to gods, devils, or to hells, or to those who are born as animals. He taught *dharma* to people’. (Yun 1999: 4-11; Guruge 2002: 2)

Master Taixu has herein emphasised on the pre-eminent nature of Humanistic Buddhism with strong reference to historical livelihood of Śākyamuni Buddha:

‘Humanistic Buddhism is what the Buddha ‘conveyed’ to the ‘human world’ with the original intents ‘to teach, instruct, benefit, and bring joy’ and ‘to attain the Buddha’s insight’. It is closely related to society and individuals evident in the Buddha’s declaration of equality: ‘all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature’, fitting the modern mentality of freedom, democracy, and equality’. (Yun 2016: 1)

Later, Master Hasing Yun demonstrates a vivid correlation between the theory and practice in person and society; everyone has a right and duty to liberate themselves, while serving the nation, state, and the world – out of humanity. In fact, as Lu (2023b: 3269) affirms, this principally leads to the cessation of suffering and the awakening of human life by transcending attachment, animosity, and ignorance. In sum, it is thus clear that – Humanistic Buddhism brought us a wide spectrum of initiatives to obtain inner calm, peace, tranquillity, and

insight within worldly life – wherein it attempted to avoid cataclysmic changes that took place in the contemporary period of China.

Over the 2,600 years, the original intent of Śākyamuni Buddha decidedly played a pivotal role in the field of Buddhism. By and large, with reference to the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* authored by Śāntideva, Buddha's actual aim was to cultivate the 'Bodhicitta' (the awakening mind) towards the Bodhisattva Path; it leads to the highest liberation from emotional and cognitive defilements by employing a couple of sublime qualities, viz, 'mahā-karuṇā' (great compassion) and 'prajñā-pāramitā' (the perfection of wisdom) (Edelglass 2009a: 388). In fact, this is, by all means, to become the highest ideal of Bodhisattva *par excellence*, who will protect all sentient beings from suffering in *samsāra* (the circle of existence). Above all, according to the *Abhiniśkramaṇa Sūtra* (T03 No. 190) and *Lotus Sūtra* (T09 No. 262), the Buddha dramatically drew upon the Middle Path (*madhyama-pratipadā*), aka the Noble Eightfold Path to unfold the subtle reality of suffering; this no doubt helped detach human beings from the vast corpus of sorrow, whilst bringing equality for all living beings – as opposed to the prevailed *Brāhmaṇic* caste system and social discrimination (Yun 2016: 2; Lu 2023b: 3269). In effect, people were guided to attain the supreme bliss of liberation through the practice of *Dharma* – for example, right views, right resolve, moral behaviour, inner cultivation, and wisdom.

Further, by reference to some of the most prominent discourses in literature, like the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, *Diamond Sūtra*, *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, and the *Lotus Sūtra*, Śākyamuni Buddha sagaciously delivered a high volume of moral teachings since the outset of enlightenment; therein lies the pursuit of calm and wisdom in life: the five precepts (*pañca-śīla*) – ten wholesome deeds (*daśa-kuśala-karma*) – the perfection of wisdom (*prajñā*) – the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) – the intrinsic nature and sublime qualities of the mind – the concept of one

true vehicle (*eka-yāna*) that the Buddha is to assist the world – the idea of skilful means (*upāya*) to fulfil moral vows to realise the *Dharma*, and so forth (Laumakis 2008: 177-200). Indeed, these compelling facets are enormously driven upon the essence of peace, insight, democracy, freedom, and equality – to evoke the intrinsic nature of life – that is endowed with themselves as such to retain the real Buddha-nature:

‘... we can find peace and liberation, be our own masters and never let our future fall into the hands of divine entities. That is why taking refuge in the Three Jewels in Buddhism is to take refuge in ourselves, just as the Buddha encouraged his disciples to ‘rely on oneself, rely on the Dhamma, rely on nothing else’’. (Saṃyuttāgama. T02 No. 99 cited in Yun 2016: 4)

In effect of this scrutiny, it becomes obvious that – early teachings of the Buddha would unanimously integrate with us and others to escalate the level of spirituality – towards final liberation of all living creatures. Hence, based on this *prima facie* evidence, the foregoing discussion will hereafter turn to examine to what extent Humanistic Buddhism revives the original intent of Śākyamuni Buddha.

### ***The perspective of ‘rensheng fojiao’ (‘Human Life Buddhism’)***

The second section will probe key features of the so-called Chinese concept, ‘*rensheng fojiao*’ (‘Human Life Buddhism’) or ‘*renjian fojiao*’ (‘Human Realm Buddhism’) (Travagnin 2022: 2); this leads us to see that Humanistic Buddhism and the actual goal of the Buddha are intimately bound up with. In the first instance, as Thapa (2010: 8-9) puts forward, Master Tai Xu and Yin Shun touched upon the original aims of the Buddha – illustrating the predominant thought of ‘human-life-Buddhism, aka Buddhism in the human realm. In light of this, there are

four cardinal references to Buddhist classical texts in the spirit of Humanistic Buddhism that echoed down the ages (Yun 1997; Santucci 2000: 129):

1. The Buddha's universal nature of compassion, practice, and wisdom in day-to-day living.
2. His advice on keeping a harmonious relationship among a family and community.
3. His vital role as a guide and teacher to overcome the problem of suffering, while benefiting all human beings on the planet.
4. His keen attention to the importance of sentient beings in their current existence onto the earthly plane.

Correspondingly, as Hopkins (1999: 29) proposes, Humanistic Buddhism should not be an abstract entity *per se* since it is inevitably based on the general realisation – due to the fact that offering service to the whole of humanity brings them to the great land of joy from the treacherous territory of worldly suffering.

Moreover, by means of '*qili qili*' (in accord with truth and human capacity), Taixu's construal of Buddhism for the human realm does not stress a sole theoretical approach in the field of early Buddhism (Daoru 2010: 173) – albeit more pragmatic viewpoints that carried out societal well-being in the contemporary society of China; this rationale is lucidly presented by Taixu, as follows:

'Until now, we must adapt the true teachings of the Buddha to the time and the capacity of humankind, also we must select the essence of the various Buddha's teachings from various ages and regions, further compiling and arranging them. Consequently, it is called the collection of 'rensheng fojiao''. (Daoru 2010: 173).

*Ergo*, whilst embracing practical benefits of the *Dharma* practice in society, the idea of human-life-Buddhism intends to embody the quintessence of the entire Buddhist doctrines at large. As Taixu further comments on this, the concept of human life Buddhism is not supposed to encourage people to leave this world to achieve something miraculous or dogmatic; instead, he suggested learning the numinous pathway for becoming a Bodhisattva, and eventually, a Buddha by the true practice of moral vows (Thapa 2010: 9):

‘... Many people thought that the aim of learning the teachings of Buddhism is to encounter death in a painless way and to have good fortune after death. This is not the true meaning of the Buddhist teaching. ... As I talk about human Buddhism, I emphasise the improvement of human life’. (Long 2000: 59)

This *ipso facto* gives rise to the subtle wisdom wherein every sentient being needs to take this into practice for their own right; it paves the way for the entire world to be changed, as a matter of fact. With reference to the *Ekottarāgama*, *Vimalakīrti-Nirdeśa Sūtra*, and *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (T12 No. 374), this sheer perspective called ‘Buddhism in the Human realm’ thereby advocates the core roots of moral life, aka the Four Divine Abodes or Immeasurables (*brahmavihāra*) such as compassion, loving-kindness, altruistic-joy, and equanimity; they act as a means of practising precepts to attain the supreme *bodhi*, i.e., wisdom in life (Yun 2016: 4-6). It is thus palpable that the original intent of Śākyamuni Buddha has been deeply ingrained in the *qua* notion of ‘*rensheng fojiao*’ (‘Human Life Buddhism’) with no doubt at all.

### **The core concepts of Humanistic Buddhism**

The last section will discover fundamental concepts of Humanistic Buddhism that can be traced back to the actual intention of the Buddha – in an intellectual manner. In general, as Yun (2016: 1) and Long (2000: 59) firmly suggest, the essence of Humanistic Buddhism is to retain a vital inspiration of wisdom and clarity – as opposed to blind faith and superstition imposed by Taoism and Confucianism to a certain degree in society; it therefore foregrounds the seeds of Threefold Training (*trīśikṣā*): self-discipline (*śīla*), self-awareness (*samādhi*), and finally, self-enlightenment (*prajñā*) – by offering multifaceted pathways into calm, peace, stability, and the truth from sorrow and fear prompted by birth and death in life. In fact, it ultimately intends to bring back the light of compassion and wisdom radiated by the Buddha – for the sake of transforming a human life to a Bodhisattva and the Buddha-nature. Having illustrated that, as Master Hsing Yun investigates, there are six main characteristics that vastly shared by the main extent of Humanistic Buddhism, as well as prior determination of Śākyamuni Buddha (Yun 2012 [1999]: 1-3; Kimball 2000: 1-52):

1. Humanity: the Buddha was a living human being, and he showed the profound path of compassion, loving-kindness, moral conduct, and wisdom through his own life.
2. Emphasis on daily life: the Buddha provided an omnipresent guidance to practise the *Dharma* on all occasions of life – for instance, walk, stand, sit, lie down, eat, drink, sleep, and so forth.
3. Altruism: the Buddha was born into this world; he hence always moved on every gesture towards all sentient beings out of great care and tenderness of others.
4. Joyfulness: the Buddhist doctrines are very keen about people's happiness by navigating them into great joy from long-lasting suffering in the world.

5. Timeliness: although the Buddha passed away over 2,500 years ago, the *Dharma* delivered by him is still beneficial for all sentient beings on the planet – in a timely manner.
6. Universality: the Buddha spread the message of compassion and wisdom to liberate all mankind on earth, but not ever taking into account social exclusion and distinction; it was *ipso facto* a universal phenomenon that is far beyond social dynamics and discrimination owing to birth, culture, religion, belief, and suchlike.

In respect of this, Master Hsing Yun lucidly argues that despite the privilege of Master Tai Xu in the field, the scope of Humanistic Buddhism is inherently associated with the original intent of the Buddha with plentiful evidence – as shown in context below:

‘... The teachings of dharma are characterised with Humanistic Buddhism. The concept of Humanistic Buddhism is not the patent of Venerable Tai Xu but the essential concern of the Buddha himself. It was introduced not as something to attract attention by novelty, but to rediscover the original teachings of the Buddha. As followers of the Buddha, we should establish Humanistic Buddhism in society with the aim to propagating and glorifying it’. (Yun 1999: 4-11; Long 2000: 67)

In sum, this undeniably clarifies that the gist of Humanistic Buddhism is deemed to be a rediscovery of Śākyamuni Buddha’s central teachings that shed light on the vernacular doctrines for years.

In addition, according to Master Taixu and Hsing Yun, most of fundamental concepts of Humanistic Buddhism are available within the textual contents: the Five Vehicles (*pañca-yāna*), the Five Precepts (*pañca-śīla*) and Ten Wholesome Actions (*dasa-kuśala-karma*), the Middle Path (*madhyama-pratipadā*), and the Dependent Origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*). However, the

analysis will herein take heed of a couple of concepts only in support of the rationale. First, as Yun (2012: 9-10) observes, there are five vehicles that help liberate oneself and others by realising the *bodhi*-mind. In consequence, the human vehicle and heavenly vehicle often deal with this-worldly matters, while *śrāvaka* and *pratyeka-buddha* vehicles are meant to be focusing on more transformative matters to transcend the world. Notably, the Bodhisattva vehicle strives to coalesce this-worldly spirit and other-worldly spirit into one connected phenomenon. This concept is more likely to refer to early scriptural teachings of Buddhism: by reference to the *Sukhāvati-vyuha Sūtra* (The Discourse of Pure Land), Amitābha Buddha can ultimately be found in one's intrinsic nature; likewise, the Pure Land, aka the Land of Bliss or Happiness can also be found within ourselves by one – who is capable of fusing with mundane and supramundane life, whilst living in the world (Laumakis 2008: 207-24; Yun 2016: 3).

Despite that, the Five Precepts (*pañca-śīla*) and Ten Wholesome Deeds (*daśa-kusala-karma*) also add an eminent value to the foregoing discussion. Generally, they are the bare bones of personal and social liberty; they can also play a leading role in managing the state of affairs in every nation and region – then, fervently establish peace and harmony amongst humankind in the world. In fact, it makes a positive impact on us to change society on the verge of Bodhisattva stages (*bodhisattva-bhūmi*), while yearning for the supreme bliss of all sentient beings (Sparham 2009: 400; Long 2000: 69). On account of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* and *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (T12 No. 374), as Yun (2016: 4) asserts, the following five precepts are the foundations of a human being; real freedom can only be achieved through the observance of these moral vows as such (Yun 2012: 11):

1. Refrain from killing living creatures, and do respect their right to live.
2. Refrain from stealing that is not given, and do respect their right to possession of wealth.

3. Refrain from sexual misconduct, and do respect their right to integrity and dignity.
4. Refrain from lying, and do respect their right to character and trust.
5. Refrain from intoxicants, and do respect their right to bodily and mental health.

By proceeding with the Five Precepts, it then solidly ensures freedom and happiness in a family and society – via the authentic practice of the Ten Wholesome Deeds; this plainly means to abstain from the bodily misleads of killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct, the verbal misleads of lying, idle talk, duplicity, and slander, as well as the mental misleads of greed, animosity, and ignorance (Guruge 2002: 76; Yun 2016: 5). Overall, based on the *Diamond Sūtra* and *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* ((Laumakis 2008: 177-200), these Five Precepts and Ten Wholesome Deeds no doubt represent the Buddha’s original teachings for personal and societal welfare in great detail – with clear directions of the Bodhisattva Path to become awakened in this life – through the embodiment of Buddha-nature. In short, principal thoughts of Humanistic Buddhism certainly get practitioners back to the prime goal of Śākyamuni Buddha.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the present study was designed to determine that Humanistic Buddhism is a revival of the original intent of the Buddha – in lieu of a new phenomenon. In effect, I have shown that to what extent Humanistic Buddhism revivifies the core doctrinal teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha. Humanistic Buddhism was *de facto* deemed as a ramification of a contemporary movement in China during the early twentieth century. In response to the devastation caused by socio-cultural and politico-religious matters, Master Taixu and Hsing Yun significantly carried out splendid missionary work – to generate new strength, solidarity, and authenticity in society – through the practice of key Buddhist teachings. With constant reference to the early Buddhist texts and doctrines, they advanced the so-called concept of Humanistic

Buddhism as a means of personal and societal well-being – in virtue of the notion, ‘*rensheng fojiao*’ (‘Human Life Buddhism’), along with other central aspects of Buddhism – such as the Threefold Training (*thriśikṣā*), the Four Immeasurables (*brahmavihāra*), the Five Precepts (*pañca-śīla*), the Ten Wholesome Deeds (*daśa-kuśala-karma*), and so forth. In particular, the results of this scrutiny prove that the approach of Humanistic Buddhism demonstrates the intellectual rigour of Bodhisattva Path to purify human life, whilst flourishing the spiritual qualities such as the calm and peace of mind, ethical behaviour, and altruistic acts in everyday life – for the sake of bringing ultimate liberation for all living beings in this planet, albeit not oneself. *Ergo*, by all means – Humanistic Buddhism is largely rolled into the sheer intention of Śākyamuni Buddha amidst socio-religious history of China.

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