

The Three Treasures and "Humanistic" Buddhism of the 20th Century

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ABSTRACT

One of the most famous of the numbered lists in Buddhism is that of the Three Treasures, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. These translate into the veneration of the founder, the teaching and the community of followers. As we explore the nature of "Humanistic" Buddhism, it is important to view it in terms of the three most basic factors in the tradition.

First, we can consider some of the features of the life of the Buddha as they relate to our contemporary situation. The Buddhist tradition defines five or six destinies for rebirth of sentient beings. In these destinies, there is no special category for those who become a Buddha. The supreme enlightenment which leads to Nirvana does not occur to someone who is born into a sphere reserved for Buddhas. Sakyamuni, in common with all other described Buddhas of this world system, finds his final enlightenment in only one of the rebirth situations, and that is the human one. There is however, one category of persons who reach the final goal outside of the human condition. We are told that the path of the Arhat may include the possibility of being a Never Returner. There is a description of the layman Kakudha who, the Buddha reports, will achieve the final state from the heavens.¹ But for Sakyamuni and Maitreya and the other Buddhas, birth as a human is the pattern that is needed before enlightenment. Even after the Nirvana, the Buddhists carefully gathered up the physical remains of the Buddha's body and enshrined them. The relic cult based on these physical remains was a major practice of Buddhism and helped constitute the institutional form of the early days of the religion.¹ In this sense, Buddhism has been "Humanistic" from the very beginning. There was, and remains, a focus on the issues of being human that dominate the teachings of the tradition. This fact should be kept in mind when we evaluate the role of being human within Buddhism.

The rebirth process is determined by karma, the actions and the results of those actions. When we define karma, it has three ways of being created. These three are through the activities of the body, speech, and thought. Once again we see the central position of a human in the three actions involving the body, sense organs, and mental processes. The non-human births also have karma but it is often instinctive or inevitable. Animals have little control over the acting out of that state of existence, they are controlled by a karmic effect. Even the deities seem to have little control over events, they live out their ordained life until the karma that creates the divine state is exhausted. Some deities can only stay in the upper state until they have a thought and the moment a thought occurs, they are reborn immediately in another destiny. Other deities have warning signs of the end of their stay in one of the heavens; the flower garlands around their bodies begin to wilt. Suddenly like a candle that is blown out, they revert to another rebirth. While we must experience the fruit of our karma in this human existence, there is the potential for achieving enlightenment, something seldom available, even to the deities in the heavens.

This is not to say that the human life is an easy one, or that it is predictable and under our control. While the deities may stay in their heavenly abodes for eons of

time, the life span of the human birth is limited. There is an urgency about the length of this life. We find the similies about living in the human form to be a constant warning about the shortness of it. Life is like a dewdrop on the tip of a blade of grass, like a wave made in water, or like bubbles in a brook. It is fleeting and soon passes away. ⁱⁱThus, the warning that one who has the thought that there is plenty of time to pursue wholesome actions, is one who leads a heedless existence. Life can be as brief as swallowing a morsel of food.ⁱⁱⁱ

While human life is fragile and passes quickly, nonetheless, we see in the human birth the ability to pursue actions which lead toward final release. Ascetic practices provide a method for achieving higher states. Even Buddhas continued to meditate and to praise the effects of this yogic exercise for humans. ^{iv}From such accounts, we can see that the ancient sages of the Buddhist tradition understood both that the human life was a crucial stage in the process toward enlightenment and that it was temporary and short. However unsatisfactory the span of existence in this human form, it does not take away the importance of this destiny that we now experience.

There are many negative statements made about the human body in the Buddhist canon. It is compared to a bag of skin that covers a rack of bones with holes in it which leak impurities such as sweat, urine, and feces. And yet, we see in many passages that this impure physical body is the vehicle for enlightenment. There is the appealing story of a group of yogins who accomplish power from ascetic practices and are able to meet Sakra, the great deity. They are very apologetic about having human bodies for they fear that their smell will be repellent to Sakra. However, the great god assures them that the body scent of the virtuous human is as sweet as a bouquet of flowers.^v The same idea is expressed in Christianity where we find the expression "odor of sanctity." While we normally assume that the body of a human belongs only in this realm, there are several stories which tell of people who go to the heavens of the Desire Realm even while still in their physical bodies.^{vi} Thus, the Buddhists describe the problems of being human. It is a necessary state for achieving enlightenment, but it involves being tied to a physical form which is subject to sickness, to advancing old age, and finally death and decay. Added to this inevitable conclusion about the human physical form, there is the further affliction of having no guarantee about the length of life. It can end in a moment or last for a hundred years. Uncertainty adds to the suffering or dissatisfaction of the human condition. Those who have not developed insight during the brief span of life will at death:

Feel fear, fright and bewilderment, as if they were suddenly attacked by wild beasts, ghosts, snakes, robbers, or murderers. One who has insight dies without fear and bewilderment.^{vii}

Even though enlightenment is possible for someone in this human body, it does not mean that there are no difficulties for those who possess such a form. This dilemma of the human condition and the fact that suffering occurs within it has been in the background of "Humanistic" Buddhism from its earliest days in China. It was T'ai-Hsu (1889-1947) who probably coined the word which we translate as "Humanistic." He was one of the great leaders of 20th century Buddhism and Master Hsing Yun continues his tradition of propagation of the faith through education and involvement with the benefit of people. Both of these important teachers have been faced with an era where Buddhism was persecuted and denied a central place within

the Chinese cultural patterns. Yet, both attempted to secure the continuity of the Buddhist teachings by reaching out to the whole of the population. The principles of helping ordinary people understand the teaching has been the dominant theme in the movement. Rather than a militant reaction to the seizure of monasteries and the government restrictions on the practices of the tradition, both T'ai Hsu and Hsing Yun have used the teachings of Buddhism to bring about a religious revival. Without trying to remove the officials responsible for suppression, the "Humanistic" Buddhist movement has carried the message of the faith directly to audiences of lay people. Nowhere is the success of that approach more evident than in the religious situation of Taiwan, where Buddhism has become a major factor in the society after years of holding a marginal position.

This leads us to the second of the Treasures, the Dharma: Teaching of the tradition. We know quite a bit about the extent of the Buddhist teachings over the centuries. The concern for the preservation of the words attributed to the Buddha and to the great sages since his time, has resulted in a enormous collection of texts in many languages. The Buddhists do not have just one canon, there are multiple canons: the Pali language texts of the Theravada, the Chinese canon, Tibetan, Mongolian, Manchu, and Sanskrit materials. Contained in these thousands of pages of documents, that are more like a library than a scripture, are the words that comprise the Dharma. Each of these canons contains some content that is not found in any of the others. Buddhist Teaching is lengthy, complex, and sophisticated.

When we explore the content of the Dharma, it is often a surprise to readers to discover that a large percentage of the writing describes the process of how we humans perceive and develop mental consciousness. In this respect, the Dharma is more like a manual of psychology or even physiology than it is a treatise on philosophy. While there are sections which describe gods and spirits and even heavens, these are always matched with accompanying teachings about how even these transcendent experiences must be transformed by human intelligence to be perceived and understood. In page after page, the Buddha is shown to be teaching his followers about the nature of the human experience. Much less space is used to teach about things that are outside of this realm of sensory information. Before full enlightenment can be experienced, the followers must understand how the sensory data is transmitted to the mind and processed with the result that we "see a tree" and "hear a song." In order to communicate this message, we read about the various forms of experience. It can be the Five Skandhas (components of perception), the Twelve Doors (of the six sense organs and the sense objects), the Eighteen Realms (the Twelve Doors with the addition of the six consciousnesses), or the Seventy Five Mental States that constitute mental moments. All of these lists are matched with the resulting ethical or religious action that will follow the mental states. It is only when we understand how our experience occurs that we have the possibility of the enlightenment in which our wisdom comprehends the reality of the world. This attention to the mental process of the human which has filled thousands of pages of sacred texts, is another example of the "Humanistic" elements in Buddhism. First, we see that the Buddha was a human and next we see that his teaching was very often directed toward the physical and mental side of human experience. Compared to some scriptures, this type of material hardly seems to be religious in nature. For Buddhism, it was the very core of the Dharma. Our senses deceive us and we believe that we are directly experiencing the

external world. The Dharma reminds us that our experience is always mental. Therefore, what we perceive is not identical to the external world and is subject to distorted interpretations which lead us deeper into ignorance about what is happening to us at any moment in time. Understanding this process is then essential, that is understanding how we perceive as a human.

When "Humanistic" Buddhism developed in the early part of this century, the leaders established educational institutions in China and one of the major parts of the curriculum was the study of the doctrines of "Mind Only." They recognized that Buddhism could not be fully expressed without careful consideration of the nature of the mind and the role it plays in human experience. While "Humanistic" Buddhism has been sensitive to the physical needs of people, it has not been just a social welfare movement. The Dharma as explained by the leaders of this form of Buddhism has included the content found in the ancient teachings that can never be far from the mental processing that we make of our experience. If this approach is followed, Buddhism cannot be reduced to simply an ethical system of behavior. It will always take us into the realm of individual explanations and analysis of how we interpret the events of our life. Greed is not just an ethical matter, it is a state of mind that results from improperly understanding the nature of experience. While we can have rules and regulations and moral positions that reject greed, the final solution according to "Humanistic" Buddhism is a mental one, which requires a shift in consciousness. This shift can occur in yogic exercises that allow the practitioner to "observe" the process of the mind and thus fully comprehend the nature of a moment of greed. There is also a place for hearing a teacher describe the process, so that a change of attitude occurs. Thus "Humanistic" Buddhism has always kept a major part of its activities fixed on the Dharma, which means discourses on human experience.

From the comments thus far, we have seen that two of the Treasures are directly related to the human condition, be it the Buddha or his Teaching. These both seem to infer that the important elements relate to internal shifts of consciousness, mental moments of insight into the nature of the perceptive process and the resultant states. This still leaves us to explore the third Treasure, the Sangha or community of believers. For "Humanistic" Buddhism, this was Four-fold: monks, nuns, laywomen and laymen. From one point of view, the "Mind Only" position would seem to infer that all of the major aspects of Buddhist teaching are inner directed and individualistic. The role of the groups that make up the Buddhist community would seem to be secondary in the face of such teaching. When we examine the Sangha, we note that it is composed only of humans. There is no indication that the gods, spirits, ghosts, animals, or hell beings were included in the community. We have texts that describe the audience for the Dharma as being in part non-human and this group often expressed belief in the teachings. However, even though they may be believers, they are not listed as part of the Four-fold Sangha. As we look at the third Treasure, the community, we once again see the focus on the human life. The group that Buddhists take refuge in are humans. There is no recommendation to take refuge with a god, no matter how powerful.

These comments about the Community raise a host of questions as to why it was so important to have this group of individuals listed as one the Treasures. The narratives of the canons give us some hint of the significance of the Community. We

have the story of the disciple Upali who approached the Buddha to say that he wanted to retire to the forest and to live the life of a hermit ascetic. The Buddha responds by telling him that if he goes to the wilderness he will certainly achieve the ability to meditate and have that experience of the Teaching. However, if he remains among the Community of people, he will be able to achieve knowledge or insight into the Teaching as opposed to only having the meditative approach of a hermit. It is one indication that Buddhists taught the importance of being in the presence of other people, for it was only in that environment that true knowledge of the Teaching can be developed. A similar idea is expressed in the famous series of pictures known as the "Oxherding." In those graphic depictions, we see the "Oxherder" move away from normal life into a state of pure trance and oneness. But it does not stop there; after this blissful state he returns to the village to live among people. The return to the village is considered by many teachers to be the true expression of his insight. The "Oxherder" no longer makes a distinction between the void and the village and this is the nature of his enlightenment.

There are many stories of individuals who sought for answers in the higher spheres and in the power of miracles and supernormal activities. In the teaching given to Kevatta, the story is told of a monk who developed supernatural powers and journeyed to the upper regions of the heavens. He wanted to have the answer to the question "What happens to the elements of existence and where do they go?" As he ascended to higher levels, he asked the same question and was always advised to go even higher. Finally he reached the highest point and came into the presence of great Brahma, the supreme deity. Here he asked the question and to his dismay even the highest god had to admit that he had no answer.^{viii} Where can one go to find such an answer? We have one solution in the famous passage set at the Nirvana of the Buddha when he tells his disciples to have no guide or refuge but the Dharma and oneself.^{ix} Once again, we see that the tradition turns us back to our human experience as the source of insight. It is humanity, the persons who surround us who become a necessary element as one attempts to understand the true nature of existence. Therefore, the Community of humans is seen as a Treasure.

From these comments, we see that "Humanistic" Buddhism has represented an approach that dates from the earliest days of Buddhism. While the development of this particular interpretation of Buddhism has happened in the current century among the Chinese community, the basic elements are not new. The fact that the revival of learning among Buddhists in China included the "Mind Only" emphasis, shows us that this was not a copy of Western social welfare ideas about the role of religion and society. It was a true Buddhist invention and response to the problems and struggles of the time. Just as Master Hsing Yun attempts to meet the needs of Chinese and other Buddhists in whatever nation or region of the world, so "Humanistic" Buddhism survives and thrives today. It is a reminder to us that while we live in this bitter sweet life of the body, Buddhism has provided explanations and teachings for this condition, and thus the name "Humanistic" Buddhism is a good description of the religion.

Notes

¹ See D. ii. 92

ⁱ Ap ii 608

ⁱⁱ A IV, 136-8

ⁱⁱⁱ A II, 305-6

^{iv} Revata Buddha has seven days in deep trance and emerged to teach. BuA.133-4

^v S. I 226

^{vi} Mil II, 291; J. ii. 248

^{vii} See Edward Conze, *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies*, Wheelwright Press: San Francisco. 1967. P.94.

^{viii} D I 211

^{ix} Sv. 152

三寶與二十世紀之“人間”佛教

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摘 要

在佛教眾多名相中，就屬三寶一詞最為人所共知，三寶是指佛、法、僧三寶，也就是佛教創教者佛陀、佛陀所說之教法、以及（隨其教法而修之）信眾團體。當我們在探究人間佛教的特質時，從佛教傳統中這三個最基本的元素著眼來看人間佛教，這是很重要的。

首先，我們可以參考佛陀一生的幾個特點中，與我們現代情況有相關之處。在佛教傳統中將眾生之輪迴分為五或六種命運，在這些命運中並沒有特別為成佛者歸出一類來，究竟證悟的涅槃之境，並不會發生在那些生在為佛所保留的界地的人身上，釋迦牟尼佛跟其他在這個世系的諸佛一樣，也是通過唯一的輪迴方式，也就是人身的形式，獲得最後的證悟之道；但是，有一種人是以人身以外的形式成就究境的目標，我們知道，在修證阿羅漢道的方式中，還包括有可能不再輪迴的阿那含果位。就佛陀的預言，有一位叫迦羅鳩駄 (Kakudha) 的在家者，將會在天界證得最高果位，但就釋迦牟尼佛、彌勒菩薩、及其他諸佛而言，人的出生在世則是證悟前所需的一種形式。即使是證得涅槃之後，佛教徒也是小心翼翼的將佛的舍利子收集並供奉起來，這種供奉身體殘留的舍利子是佛教徒主要的修行，同時也幫助建立這個宗教早期的習俗。就這一觀點來看，佛教從一開始就很“人間”化，這個傳統的教法不管是在過去，現在也仍然保留著對作為人本身這個主題的強調與重視，當在我們評估作為人本身在佛教中所扮演的角色時，應切記這一事實。