Humanistic Buddhism in the Digital Age: Make Truth Great Again!

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The new religion of the 21st century is turning out to be dataism. First mentioned by *New York Times* columnist David Brooks in 2013, the data revolution enables human cognition to be augmented by algorithms that could work on all kinds of information (Brooks 2013). In dataism, the value of humans or an enterprise is assessed by their ability to contribute to data processing. This may seem surprising to some of you in the audience but perhaps, a question may confirm this fact. If you were to employ an administrative assistant, would you choose one who can use the mobile phone to help you manage your busy calendar, employ the latest software to turn your ideas into stunning presentations, and churn out reports as you speak with voice-recognition technology or one who slowly punches on a keyboard and still rely on shorthand to take minutes? Alright, you may say that history has seen many jobs being replaced and people simply must learn new skills. However, what we are about to experience in the Fourth Industrial Revolution or Digital Age is not only a simple paradigm shift.

The Digital Age and Its Implications on Religion and Education

The centrality of technology to our social order means that the human is increasingly being omitted in our narrative. Emphasis on numerical trends and evidence (usually quantitative) has ironically resulted in greater complexity and uncertainty. *New York Times* reporter, Steve Lohr, highlights that big data will be a vehicle for how decisions will be made in virtually every field in the future (Lohr 2015). Take for example the medical profession in the West. Doctors diagnose our illness by reading computer-generated reports of our blood and urine samples, or scans using highly-sophisticated machines. They are hardly treating the human as a holistic organism that consists of physical form, feelings, thoughts, volition and consciousness. Yuval Noah Harari ends his bestseller *Homo Deus* with a pertinent reminder that if organisms were to be seen as nothing more than algorithms and life as data processing,

then what would society and life look like when non-conscious but highly intelligent algorithms were to know us better than we know ourselves (Harari 2017, 462).

There are some serious implications to two domains very close to my heart. One is higher education and the other is religion. Let us look at the latter first. If we look through the lens of the history of religions, we are seeing a shift of faith from the divine God(s) to humans and now to data (Lau 2019). People relied on the Divine to help alleviate their fears of the unknown and unpredictable. The Divine became sacred as it was unknowable and hence, unable to replicate. People sought divine assistance on what may be best for humanity. As science and technology improved, humans found many ways to reduce the threats of the unknown and hence, humans became "sacred" as the most sophisticated data processing system in the universe. Humans could determine their ideal solutions. However, of late, the human is facing an existential challenge. With unprecedented computing power, external systems are taking over the authority from humans to determine our future. Where does that place religions e.g. Buddhism in people's lives?

The second domain of interest to me is higher education. Higher education is charged with the task of training graduates to cope with this data explosion. With 2.7 zettabytes of data already in existence worldwide (Wassén 2019) and 44 zettabytes (44 trillion gigabytes) expected by 2020 (Turner 2014), workers and denizens must manage this huge data universe. A work-in-progress at the global level is the *OECD Education 2030* report that considers the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of students today in order to thrive in the year 2030. It acknowledges that the rapid advances in science and technology need to be harnessed with a sense of purpose or else inequities will only widen, thereby causing further social fragmentation and resource depletion (OECD 2018, 3). The *OECD Learning Compass 2030,* a learning framework, recognizes that the wellbeing of society is a shared destination. New methods

and goals of (higher) education are now in the making.

At the center of this learning framework, is a set of transformative competencies considered critical to be incorporated into the curricula. Leaders have realized that data crunching ability is inadequate for education to be successful in a world where robots and automata are better equipped to deal with the voluminous data. The initial list of important constructs[1] (OECD 2018, 17) are made up of mostly humanistic values for social emotional growth to build a sustainable future.

A Prototype in Australia's Nan Tien Institute

This report on the future of education provides an opportunity for Humanistic Buddhism in more ways than one. Humanistic Buddhism can now be positioned as an educational product, rather than a creed in western societies where religion is diminishing in importance. In a world where the human may soon be replaced by machines, a well-designed curriculum and pedagogy in Humanistic

1 Adaptability/ Flexibility/ Adjustment/ Agility – Compassion – Conflict resolution – Creativity/ Creative thinking/ Inventive thinking – Critical-thinking skills – Curiosity – Empathy – Engagement/Communication skills/ Collaboration skills – Equality/ Equity – Global mind-set – Goal orientation and completion (e.g. grit, persistence) – Gratitude – Growth mind-set – Hope – Human dignity – Identity/Spiritual identity – Integrity – Justice – Manual skills for information and communication technology (related to learning strategies) – Manual skills related to the arts and crafts, music, physical education skills needed for the future – Meta-learning skills (including learning to learn skills) – Mindfulness – Motivation (e.g. to learn, to contribute to society) – Open mind-set (to others, new ideas, new experiences) – Perspective-taking and cognitive flexibility – Pro-activeness – Problem solving skills – Purposefulness – Reflective thinking/Evaluating/Monitoring – Resilience/Stress resistance – Respect (for self, others, including cultural diversity) – Responsibility (including locus of control) – Risk management – Self-awareness/Self-regulation/Self-control – Self-efficacy/Positive self-orientation – Trust (in self, others, institutions)

Buddhism can be a part of the educational reform to engage the full human being in the teaching and learning process. Humanistic Buddhism may contribute to the *OECD Education 2030* project through a new curriculum being developed in Australia's Nan Tien Institute (NTI).

NTI launched the world's first Graduate Certificate in Humanistic Buddhism in 2019. Students in this course are provided with a much firmer base for self-worth and values-based action and therefore, are more empowered to rise above self-centeredness and system disintegration. The NTI program offers much more than traditional secular and Buddhist education, in that, based on the bodhicitta, students are provided with understanding and strategies for making a positive difference to organizations and communities. This difference derives from NTI students having developed a far deeper understanding of humanistic values for co-operation and care.

To prepare students to become social change catalysts, the course recommends two core subjects. The first subject *Foundational Texts in Humanistic Buddhism* presents the characteristics of a humanistic Buddha and core values as presented in the Theravada, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions. Students also explore the rise of humanism and the pitfalls of action if the Buddhist value of equality is not fully embraced. Renowned teachers in each tradition present interpretations of ancient texts in the modern society—demonstrating the ability to adjust text to context, as well as expounding values such as compassion, empathy, equality, hope, human dignity, identity, integrity, mindfulness, respect, responsibility and trust. Discussions and assessments further reinforce learning in a safe space. The team of five teachers presented diversity and demonstrated the value of collaboration. Interestingly, one student entered a mini-crisis on the first day as he could not reconcile the god-like Buddha that he grew up worshipping with the humanistic Buddha this subject revealed. As the class

progressed, he felt liberated and empowered by the humanistic and practical Dharma he learned. This [copyedited] written feedback is indicative of how learning has become enjoyable and fruitful for another student:

> *"The subject facilitator and the team have skilfully integrated various backgrounds of professional and experts... I have learned a lot and enjoyed every single moment in this subject. The Live Q & A with remote teachers, group discussion and reflective journal were great. Really fostering students to critically think and analyze each of our thoughts."*

Critical-thinking skills and curiosity are nurtured in this and other subjects in NTI. The second core subject *Principles of Professional Engagement* follows to review ethical and humanistic approaches to interacting with people, Buddhists and non-Buddhists. In this practical subject, students work co-operatively to discuss values-based approaches to real-world problems. As the name of this subject suggests, students learn to professionalize Dharma engagement activities: communicate with an audience and lead projects, as well as ways to support one another's project. Lively, vibrant conversations help to convey information in the best possible way to the audience and promote experiential (fun) learning in a positive classroom environment.

Just before flying to Taiwan to attend this panel, I collected some preliminary student feedback about the course. Some interesting comments include the following:

- A local government staff picked up ways to apply the Buddha's practical wisdom in daily life.
- A retiring scientist learned to extend the boundaries of experience by doing new things and accepting challenges; new techniques learned changed his outlook and concept

of teaching.

- An architect understood more about humanity and humanism. She was eager to apply her professional skills from a humanistic point of view and hoped to influence her family and community.
- A director of studies in a school for international students had a wonderful time of peace and reflection living in the Nan Tien Temple's lodge and learning from Buddhist practitioners and professionals. He encapsulated his learning for the subject by accepting the imperfect him through self-transparency and striving towards perfection by creating positive influences around him.

Returning to the *OECD Education 2030* report, this course demonstrates in its first year the incubation of a growth mindset (instead of a fixed mindset) in areas that are important to being human. Students finished the subject feeling equipped with life skills and the Dharma to face real world challenges. However, I have noticed one important omission in the list of competencies identified in the OECD report and that is ethics or morality. Students learn from teachers. In higher education, teachers act as facilitators of scholarship. They have a dual moral responsibility: as values educators and as moral agents of the profession. Hence, NTI is now creating its *Buddhist Ethics Positioning* paper to articulate its aspiration to express Buddhist values and teachings throughout its operations and education programs.

By 2020, NTI will start to augment its contemplative pedagogy with the cultivation of Buddhist ethics. In this positioning exercise, staff and student representatives will be invited to explore the components of the threefold training of morality, meditative concentration, and wisdom. Collaboratively, they will develop the rules of conduct that will create a conducive community of practice and learning. This process will allow the institute to select the most relevant competencies identified in the

OECD Education 2030 report and deepen them in a local context. As an example, assignments may be considered as an opportunity to deepen one's learning as well as practice right speech and right writing. Hence, students become responsible and are trained in integrity. Buddhist ethics can be seamlessly embedded into the learning process. As we speak, the *Buddhist Ethics Positioning* paper is being sent out to management and students for initial feedback.

Frank Reynolds identified three basic interpretive skills that should be imparted in a Buddhist tertiary education: sympathetic understanding, critical analysis, and personal evaluation (Reynolds 2002, 11). These skills are useful beyond the walls of the academy and I designed them into the humanistic Buddhist classroom through NTI's contemplative pedagogy. For each lecture, students check their intention, reflect on the interpretation and application of knowledge, critically evaluate the methods and knowledge with peers collaboratively, as well as embody the values consciously. This cycle of learning is aligned with and extends the *OECD Learning Compass 2030* of Anticipation-Action-Reflection. I am often very impressed with the insights received in student assessments. Here is an example from a peer feedback reflective report:

> *"The Diamond Sutra note on the giver and receiver being one and the same prompted further inner enquiry: what is my gift as the giver? This question turned a mirror onto myself and made me realize that my critique is also a reflection of what matters to me, and as such expectations I put on myself when building a presentation. I inferred that it may be true for my peers as well, and their feedback offers insights into what matters to them, and their filters. When listened and absorbed in this way, feedback from my peers gives me insight into*

my performance but also into their needs and expectations, and as such an opportunity to know them better. As a consequence, feedback, both as a recipient and giver, is an opportunity to get to know ourselves better. It blurs the border of the recipient and the giver. A corollary of this observation is that by not giving feedback, we are also robbing ourselves, giver and recipient, of an opportunity to improve our skills and our self and mutual understanding."

Since Humanistic Buddhism as an educational product is still in its infancy, NTI has set up a Humanistic Buddhism Centre (HBC) to support the teaching and learning of this new field. Its research includes the positioning of Buddhist Ethics in higher education (described in the preceding section) and the assessment of humanistic or ethical values in a cross-institutional exploratory project on *Beyond Mindfulness.* HBC is also working with Fo Guang Shan's Institute of Humanistic Buddhism and volunteers worldwide to translate Chinese academic journal articles into English (journal.nantien.edu.au). This cloud-based community of 50 volunteers in nine countries has completed translating two volumes of articles for NTI students and scholars worldwide. It is also now developing the world's first *Humanistic Buddhism Visualiser* that presents a bibliography of authenticated texts in Humanistic Buddhism using network analysis. HBC rides on technological platforms to support canonical readers (ntireader.org), mobile apps and podcasts (soundcloud.com/nti-hbc).

The higher educational institution of the future will need to distinguish itself as a place of practice where the human is at the center of the narrative. The HBC supports this feature by creating *Communities of Practice* (communities.nantien.edu.au). This is where character development can continue to take place. Since late 2018, NTI runs day-long engagement activities for the local

community to develop a practice of reflection, get clarity on some important modern crisis, cultivate a response (in thought, words and action) that is guided by humanistic and Buddhist values and wisdom, and build communities and friendships. Themes explored include "The Power of the Gift," "The Power of the Mind," "Healing an Anxious Society," and "We Can Make A Difference." These successful engagements are now documented in a Compendium that hopes to stimulate similar communities to be replicated worldwide. Students of the Graduate Certificate in Humanistic Buddhism are provided with the mechanisms for deploying similar Communities.

Educationists agree that character formation is the essence of education. The necessity is perhaps to look for real-life stories and anecdotes from familiar situations to appreciate the power of the Dharma. Stories of transformation should be captured. One MA research essay in NTI, *The Contribution of Lay Buddhist to the Naturalisation of Buddhism in Australian Workplaces,* systemically studies how the Dharma has been used in 51 real-life situations (McKenzie 2019). The outcome of this piece of research is presented at this year's *Humanistic Buddhism Symposium* in Fo Guang Shan. More stories of the transformative power of the Dharma are also captured in *Turning Points: Stories of Humanistic Buddhism* (facebook.com/turningpointsstories).

Venerable Master Hsing Yun, founder of NTI, inspired presidents of Buddhist universities in 2017 by alluding to the university as a "place of great learning for great people" by fostering self-education; of importance is the learning of great knowledge, great morality, great magnanimity and the great path. Hence, the future Humanistic Buddhist classroom is one whereby students make the course, and not take the course. They will teach one another in transdisciplinary and entertaining ways in the classroom. By placing the human in the center of the narrative, students will learn to build relationships rather than succeed at competition. There is

an obligation to respectfully work out a solution together rather than to be provided with solutions; something I call path-finding rather than path-following.

Conclusion: Make Truth Great Again!

In a world dominated by politics and economics, and where science and technology is ubiquitous, it is important to avoid abuse. For example, GTCom, a Chinese company, collects 30 million pieces of data from over 200 countries covering more than 65 different languages every day (Red Flags 2019). It is no secret that social media platforms such as Google and Facebook know all about our calendar appointments, sites we browse, shopping preferences, and much more. We can be easily assisted or manipulated. Even more dangerously, the power when placed in the wrong hands or when exercised unethically may cause this planet to self-destruct. We have a collective responsibility to use this unprecedented power in our hands to pursue the Truth. At stake is humanity and what it means to be human.

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary declared "post-truth" as its word of the year. Experts and sages are dismissed; alternative facts that can gain the most "likes" and citations are valued; and trust and accountability are eroding worldwide. Ironically, the massive data universe may only serve to confuse rather than enlighten. Hence, there is an imperative to "make Truth great again" in the Digital Age. Venerable Master Hsing Yun defines Humanistic Buddhism as what the Buddha taught, and that which is essential to human beings which is virtuous and beautiful (Hsing Yun 2016, v). As educators, we now have the responsibility to awaken the world to the power of the Truth of impermanence and interdependence as well as remind our students to value the Buddha's teachings as pointing to the Truth that represents purity, virtues, and beauty.

Water is quiet if not stirred by wind.
Mind perseveres if not stirred by distractions.

—Humble Table, Wise Fare