
CHIN KUNG: A “POTENTIAL” HUMANISTIC BUDDHIST

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to demonstrate that Chinese Buddhist monk Chin Kung’s theory of “Buddhism as Education” exemplifies Humanistic Buddhism, even though he never made that claim himself. Humanistic Buddhism is a Buddhist revival movement in China of the 20th Century, which emphasizes this life and this world while playing down concerns about the afterlife and other worlds. It highlighted rationality, with the demotion of Buddhist mystic and supernatural elements. Humanistic Buddhism embodies an inevitable tendency in modern and contemporary development of Chinese Buddhism, and Chin Kung lives in the same era. Therefore this paper attempts to demonstrate Chin Kung’s theory and practice of “Buddhism as Education” can be seen as a contemporary example of Humanistic Buddhism and Chin Kung is a “potential” Humanistic Buddhist, in order to offer a reference to future study on more “potential” Humanistic Buddhists like Chin Kung in China.

Chin Kung: A Buddhist “Educator”

Chin Kung, whose lay name is Yehong, Xu, was born in 1927 in Lujiang County, Anhui Province of China. In his early life he studied Buddhist sutras, history and philosophy under the guidance of eminent scholars and Buddhist Dharma Masters in Taiwan. He is also well-versed in other Buddhist schools, and in the teachings of Confucianism, Taoism, Catholicism, Islam and other religions. After he became a monk in 1957, he began lecturing and propagating the Buddha’s teachings throughout the world.¹

Chin Kung regards Buddhism as education, rather than a religion. It has become the emphasis of his Buddhist teaching. Facing the decline of modern Chinese Buddhism, Chin Kung criticized its spirit worship and devotion to supernatural beings. This led him to develop his approach for propagating the Dharma and his theory of “Buddhism as education.” He has been invited to Australia, the United States and other places for preaching Buddhism and founded various international Buddhist organizations like Pure Land Learning College, Buddha Educational Foundation, and others. These Institutions are not named “temples”, but have a more academic meaning. Unlike other Buddhist masters, he has never become an abbot of any temple, which follows his wish of being identified as an “educator” rather than a “missionary.” Chin Kung attaches great importance to role of “Buddhist Education” in life, society and the world, in particular the role of Buddhist moral and ethical education, and hope to use education to resolve conflicts and promote world peace. He has acquired many honorary doctorate degrees and titles of honorary professor from various Universities in the world. During the time he lived in United States, he has been awarded the Honorary Citizen both the state of Texas and the city Dallas.²

The theory of “Buddhism as Education,” is the ideological achievement of Chin Kung’s active promotion of Buddhism in a contemporary context, and is also a theoretical attempt to combine Buddhist theory with modern society through the Mahayana Buddhist

spirit of worldly care. As a typical example and prominent representative of the emerging Buddhist modernization movement, Chin Kung's theory of "Buddhism as Education" is worth emphasizing and studying.

Humanistic Buddhism as an Inevitable Outcome in Chinese Buddhist Development

In the 20th century, Humanistic Buddhism came into being and quickly became a powerful Buddhist movement in China. It began to exert a much more profound influence in Chinese Buddhist circles than any individual theories of any influential Chinese Buddhist masters. It has been generally accepted and vigorously developed by various modern Chinese Buddhists and has been even regarded as the guideline for the development of the Chinese Buddhism.³ Humanistic Buddhism began as a response to the decline and marginalization of Chinese Buddhism in modern times. The encroachment of Western colonial power had resulted in a significant decline of Chinese Buddhism.⁴ Buddhism was gradually marginalized and reduced to rites involving funeral services and other ceremonies. Buddhist monks withdrew from society and went to the mountains to seek personal liberation. In this context, Humanistic Buddhism rose as a Buddhist revival movement in China of the 20th Century, which was initiated by Master Tai Xu (1890-1947). Tai Xu suggests that original intention of Buddhism has always been concerned about real life, rather than retreat from the human world. Tai Xu proposed the theory of "Renjian Fojiao (Humanistic Buddhism)." "Humanistic Buddhism" initiated by Tai Xu, and promoted by various Chinese Buddhists in post-Tai Xu period, has two notable features.

First, Humanistic Buddhism emphasizes rationality, with less emphasis on the sacred. For the attainment of ultimate goal, it emphasizes rational ways, with a demotion of mystical religious experience and obscuring of divine power. It shows strong rational characteristics. Humanistic Buddhism focuses on cultivation of ethics in this life, which is a compulsory approach to ultimate spiritual goal of Buddhism. For

example, Tai Xu believes that the first step of learning Buddhism is to learn how to be a good individual. To be a good person in reality of life, and then gradually “evolving into a Buddha.” This is what he frequently mentioned “The perfection of personality is equivalent to attainment of Buddhahood.”⁵

Second, Humanistic Buddhism focuses on *this* life, the improvement of *this* imperfect world. It stresses life rather than death. This is reflected in its concept of time and space. In terms of time, it is concerned with this life and ignores the afterlife and Buddhist concepts like *karma* or *samsara*. In terms of space, Humanistic Buddhism also is concerned with this world, focusing on the improvement of life and this world, against world-weariness and detachment from this world, or the devotion to the world on the “other side” as one finds in Pure Land of Sukhavati. Rather it attempts to adapt to modern society through a variety of secular means and participates in various secular movements, in order to comply with a variety of secular goals. It reduces the criticism and even increases the positive affirmation of this world, though Buddhism regarded this world as “Saha” which means bearing and enduring suffering. This is reflected in the ultimate goal of Humanistic Buddhism of seeking a pure land in this world by purification of human mind rather than a pure land in Buddhist cosmology.⁶

As Tai Xu pointed out, Humanistic Buddhism embodies a Buddhism that accords with both Dharma principles and human dispositions,⁷ Humanistic Buddhism is a “compromise” for its survival and adaptation to a certain era. Modern Chinese Buddhism was in the edge of social life. In such a situation, if Buddhism attached too much emphasis on super-human, otherworldly or mysterious Buddhist concepts, with a divorce from rationality and this worldly care, with a loss of function of saving the world and benefiting the people, it is bound to be marginalized and even to be eliminated.

In the Post-Tai Xu period, Humanistic Buddhism is also a Buddhist form which caters to Chinese Socialism, which was originally based on Marxism-Leninism, an atheistic and materialistic ideology. Buddhism

also attempts to adjust to and serve the socialist order in the Chinese political context.

Also, Humanistic Buddhism is not just a passive adaption to society, it also reflects the Buddhists' positive response and sense of responsibility to a variety of social problems and crises. Many urgent problems today have threatened the survival of mankind. Older Buddhist teachings which emphasize meditation or Nirvana are unable to lead to solutions to these problems. Humanistic Buddhism encourages Buddhists to first solve the immediate problems through Buddhist teachings and values, before pursuing Nirvana and ultimate liberation.

As an influential contemporary Chinese Buddhist master living in the same era with Humanistic Buddhism, in order to adapt to the times, Chin Kung's Buddhist theory more or less coincides with the thought of Humanistic Buddhism.

Buddhism as Education and the de-emphasis of the Sacred

Chin Kung's Theory of "Buddhism as Education" highlights the rationality of Humanistic Buddhism. Chin Kung criticized "Religious Buddhism" or "superstitious" Buddhism, as actually weakening the sacred aspects by mixing it with supernatural elements. He believed that "Religious Buddhism" has been distorted by superstition.⁸ Buddhism was widely regarded by Chinese people to be making offering to the Buddha statues or praying for blessings and fortune. From the perspective of Chin Kung, unlike other religions, Buddha is not a supreme God, the Buddhahood is open for everyone, pure devotion to the Buddha does not make any sense. The "parable of the raft" in the Buddhist sutras supports Chin Kung's argument. The Buddha only gave people a "raft (Dharma)," but people are supposed to go across the "river (Samsara)" by themselves.⁹ Engels said:

All religions are nothing but the reflection of illusion in people's minds from the external forces that dominate the daily life of people, in this reflection, shared power takes the form of super-human strength.¹⁰

According to this definition of religion, Buddhism is still a religion with a belief in various super-human strength. The principle of Buddhist teachings contain super-human elements, like the karma, samsara, rebirth in Pure Land, the power of mantra and so forth. In Mahayana Buddhism, Buddha also have various characters of God. Visible.

But according to Chin Kung, the Buddha “is a compulsory social educator, had never sought compensation, completely for fulfillment of his obligations.”¹¹ Buddhism is an Education regarding the truth of the universe (our living environment) and the life (ourselves), the education of how to get rid of erroneous thoughts and attaining the complete wisdom to understand life and the universe with the aim of ending suffering and living in harmony with the world.¹² And for the approach of attainment of the ultimate goal of Buddhist Education, Chin Kung pointed out “five subjects” : namely “Three Acts of Pure Karma,” “The six Harmonies,” “The three learnings,” “The Six Paramitas” and “The ten great vows of Universal worthy Bodhisattva.” It suggests that, to achieve the ultimate goal of Buddhism, one must attach more emphasis on the ethical practices of Mahayana Buddhism, while playing down supernatural elements like mantras or chanting. In fact, all of the five “subjects” are from the Buddhist scriptures. Chin Kung pointed out that each one is a way people deal with their daily lives. For instance, the “Three Acts of Pure Karma” teaches people to practice the filial piety loving-kindness in their lives. “The Six Harmonies” teaches the principle of coexistence with the public in a community. “The Six Paramitas” teaches the guidelines for dealing with other people in one’s life.¹³

Chin Kung also made an “educational translation” of Buddhism from various aspects. In terms of Appellation, Buddha and his disciples is a teacher-student relationship, while in other religion, it is difficult to find such a relation. In terms of organizational structure, Chin Kung regards temples as combination of Buddhist Universities and museums, rather than religious places, Buddha and Bodhisattva statues are symbolisms of the virtues, like Guan Yin Bodhisattva represents infinite compassion.

“Guan Yin Bodhisattva, the most popular Bodhisattva in China, represents Infinite Compassion. When we see this statue, it reminds us to apply compassion when dealing with the world, its people and surroundings. However, people nowadays worship Guan Yin Bodhisattva as a god and pray for the relief of suffering and to eliminate obstacles. This is a superstitious view and misconception.”¹⁴

For Chin Kung, the term “Arhat, Bodhisattva and Buddha” are just different levels of Buddhist cultivation, rather than supernatural beings, just like degree system in school education. However, Chin Kung seems to fail to notice that, there are a great deal of “superstitious” content like the Buddha saving sentient beings with supernatural powers as well as practices of reciting the Buddha’s name for the relief of suffering in Mahayana Buddhism. For example, *The Lotus Sutra* says:

“If any of the countless hundreds of thousands of myriads of kotis of living beings who are undergoing all sorts of suffering hear of Gwan Shr Yin Bodhisattva and concentrate on reciting his name, Gwan Shr Yin Bodhisattva will immediately hear their voices and deliver them. If a person who upholds the name of Gwan Shr Yin Bodhisattva enters a great fire, the fire will not burn him, all owing to this Bodhisattva’s awesome spiritual power.”¹⁵

Similarly, various Mahayana scriptures like *The Sutra of the Medicine Buddha* and *The Sutra of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha’s Fundamental Vows* also mentions contents of “unconditional” salvation through praying for Buddhas or Bodhisattvas. Apparently, Chin Kung emphasizes the Buddha’s virtues, with a demotion of worship of these mysterious powers. It reflects Chin Kung’s objection to regard Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as omnipotent supernatural beings, and his effort to rationalize Buddhism. It is consistent with the direction of reform of Humanistic Buddhism.

Sukhavati as a University rather than a Paradise: Chin Kung's Humanistic View on Pure Land Buddhism

Normally Buddhism has been regarded as atheism and a humanistic religion, probably this argument is difficult to be applied to a special Mahayana Buddhist school, Pure Land Buddhism. This Buddhist school believes there is a pure land like the heaven in Christianity, in this land there is Buddha called Amitabha like the God in Christianity. Believers can be reborn in the pure land by mindfulness of Buddha and devotion to Amitabha. The approach for salvation is pretty like that in Christianity. Pure Land Buddhism, because of its ease of practice, has become a popular contemporary Chinese Buddhist school, it can be said that contemporary Chinese Buddhism is Pure Land Buddhism. However, this theistic Buddhist school is difficult to reconcile with humanistic Buddhism and Chin Kung's theory of "Buddhism as education." While as a Pure Land Buddhist master, Chin Kung actually has transformed Pure Land Buddhism into a humanistic Buddhist school.

According to Pure Land Buddhism, the traditional Mahayana approach of gradual spiritual cultivation is very tough. In other Buddhist schools, practitioners are supposed to go through a long period of discipline, in order to purify all kinds of bad karma, and cultivate enough good karma to achieve the ultimate goal of Buddhahood. However, in Pure Land practice, one is able to achieve "rebirth in Pure Land with Karma (Ch. daiyewangsheng)." Even an individual who had accumulated boundless bad karma, as long as he chants the Buddha's name, and relies on Amitabha's power, will be reborn in the Pure Land through his faith and vows.¹⁶ It can be regarded as an easy salvation through other-worldly powers and other-worldly concerns. In comparison, Humanistic Buddhism is concerned about this world, it correspondingly proposes a theory of the establishment of "a pure land on earth," opposing seeking a Pure Land in the "other world."

Chin Kung regarded Buddhism as education, and did an educational translation of Pure Land Buddhism. Here it is considered

through three aspects, namely: his concept of Pure Land of Sukhavati, his view on mindfulness of Amitabha and his emphasis on the “three acts of pure karma.”

First, He regarded Pure Land of Sukhavati as a university for “continuous education.” (Buddhist cultivation), a “transfer station” to Buddhahood, rather than a heaven or a paradise for enjoyment.

Western Pure Land of Sukhavati is a school. Buddha’s career is teaching, our career is seeking knowledge. Buddha recommended us to be a student and to attend classes every day in Pure Land..... The aim we reborn in there, not for anything else, is like studying abroad, to enrich our wisdom and virtues, then come back to help those suffering beings.....The purpose of the Pure Land is to train Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.....Pure Land is definitely not only our refuge. There are only two careers there: teacher and student.....there is no worker, farmer or business man there.¹⁷

It suggests that rebirth in Pure Land does not mean the attainment of Nirvana, one who has achieved rebirth in Pure Land is still required to continue to learn and practice. This world is called “the evil world of five turbidities”¹⁸ in which there is no good “learning environment” and no good instructors. In comparison, the Pure Land is like a “university”.

Second, in Chin Kung’s view, mindfulness of Buddha is not simply a devotion to Buddha, or chanting the name of Amitabha as well as mental visualization of Amitabha and Pure Land, but means mindfulness of Buddha’s virtues and implementation of them into everyday life.¹⁹ For the establishment of the Buddha-land, *The Infinite Life Sutra* described Amitabha as one who had accumulated merit and amassed virtues during countless *kalpas*. Chin Kung seems to remind believers that even the “teacher” Amitabha had not achieved his residence in Pure Land of Sukhavati merely through Buddha name chanting, but through the accumulation of countless virtues. In his Buddhist education, Amitabha is also a teacher and role model. For “students,” only chanting teacher’s name is of no use, one must learn from

teacher's virtue accumulated in the past as well as teacher's great compassion of helping all living beings.

Last, emphasis on Buddhist ethical practice, like "Three Acts of Pure Karma" in *The Sutra on Contemplation of Amitayus*.

1. Caring for one's parents, attending to one's teachers and elders, compassionately refraining from killing, and doing the ten good deeds;
2. Taking the three refuges, keeping the various precepts and refraining from breaking the rules of conduct;
3. Awakening aspiration for Enlightenment, believing deeply in the law of causality, chanting the Mahayana sutras and encouraging people to follow their teachings.²⁰

However, these ethical practices are normally regarded as auxiliary practices by Pure Land Buddhism, and not necessary requirements.²¹ But for Chin Kung, these ethical practices are necessary conditions for rebirth in Sukhavati, for one who even fails to be a good man, cannot become a Buddha. For instance, Chin Kung regards Buddhism as Education, education is respect for teachers, but in Chin Kung's opinion, respect for teachers is fundamentally based on filial piety, one who does not act filially towards parents will naturally not respect his teachers. Without respect to teachers, then the whole Buddhist education will be an empty talk.²²

Chin Kung's educational transformation of Pure Land Buddhism, has changed it from an "easy way" into a "tough way." It is Chin Kung's "compromise" for Pure Land School to adapt it to seek societal development. A Buddhist sect which merely concerns about a world of "other side" or concepts like supernatural power of Buddha, with a lower of Buddhist ethics, is hard to gain a footing in modern and contemporary China. Therefore, Chin Kung attempts to transform this most influential Chinese Buddhist sect into a humanistic, ethics-centered and rational sect. In this sense, though Chin Kung has not yet clearly stated he is a proponent of Humanistic Buddhism, but it can be said Chin Kung is a "Humanistic Pure Land Buddhist."

Education Rescue Crises: Chin Kung's Social Engagement

Humanistic Buddhism focuses on this life, the improvement of this mundane world and building a pure land on earth. It adapts to modern society through a variety of secular means. Chin Kung is also a socially engaged Buddhist, who participates in various secular movements, in order to achieve a variety of secular goals through application of his idea of "Buddhist Education." It is mainly reflected in his Promotion of peace as well as promotion of ethical and moral education.

For Chin Kung, misunderstandings between different religions and cultures is an important factor which leads to all kinds of conflict and wars between nations. So he attached a great importance to peace between various world religions and diverse cultures. He has enhanced mutual understanding and corporation between different religious groups in Singapore, Indonesia and Australia and so on. And his weapon to unite religious groups is his idea of "Multicultural Education." In Chin Kung's view, all the Religions are reflections of a single "true God", various transformations of God are for the convenience of enlightenment, to adapt to different regions and cultures.²³ It is similar to the famous British philosopher and theologian John H. Hick who proposed religious pluralism which states that all religions share a common ultimate reality.

But this religious approach is slow to be accepted by monotheistic religions like Christianity which insists on superiority of their own beliefs. As a response, Chin Kung states that all the religions concern about sufferings, share a common philosophy of peace, compassion and loving-kindness.²⁴ So they are able to put aside prejudices and develop mutual tolerance, mutual respect and mutual trust, in order to save the current world which is filled with conflicts and disasters. Likewise, the Universal Catholic theologian, Paul F. Knitter, noted that without integration with global responsibility, religious pluralism will not make any sense.²⁵ Only global responsibility can be a common ground for all world religions. In the 1990s, the Parliament of the world's Religions proposed a theory of "global ethics," which attempted to serve as a stable

though somewhat minimal moral consensus among world's religious and cultural traditions, in order to arouse the consciousness of responsibility to promote world peace of all religions.²⁶ Chin Kung's mode of religious dialogue, is close to Paul F. Knitter's "problem-centered" religious dialogue model, and coincides with the essence of "global ethics." Chin Kung creates the possibility for interreligious cooperation so religions can go beyond their own limitations and contribute to the lofty ideal of peace and progress of all mankind.

Chin Kung states that the ideal of the establishment of a Pure Land on earth in Humanistic Buddhism is possible. It directly relies on purification of human mind. He used the argument of "everything is made from the mind alone" in Avatamsaka Sutra to explain the root cause of all crises is the "butterfly effect" of the evil mind of individuals. Chin Kung even pointed out evil thoughts can not only cause man-made disasters, can also influence the external environment. Natural disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis are all essentially caused by human mind. He constantly used the water experiment²⁷ of Japanese scientist Dr. Masaru Emoto, who claimed human mind is able to directly influence the molecular structure of water, to support his argument. Masaru Emoto, as a Japanese researcher entrepreneur and author, claimed that the human mind is able to directly influence the molecular structure of water.²⁷ In Chin Kung's view, the report is able to fully explain that idea can affect the change of matter, the heart can influence and change the external environment, and this discovery informs environmental protection workers that the purification of environment relies on the purification of mind.

The purification of human mind is not an easy task. Chin Kung presents a unique method-education.

In modern times, Master Tai Xu was frequently advocating a pure land on earth. In fact, if we are able to implement the three roots of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, a pure land will appear on earth. We call them universal education, the teaching which is widespread around the world. What is this? Education of morality, ethics and the

law of causation, if these three universal educations can be promoted worldwide, a pure land on earth will not be impossible.²⁸

In contemporary society, Chin noticed that many parents are busy working, while ignoring the children's family education. While school education focuses on science and technology, social education deals with ethical issues. Therefore, Chin Kung believes only "religious education," which means common ethical and moral teachings and virtues in all major world religions, can be used to defuse disasters and conflicts.²⁹ Here Chin Kung no longer says "Buddhist Education," but uses the term "Religious Education," which reflects his hope of promoting education widely but without causing inter-religious conflict. Chin Kung believed that religious moral education can resolve conflicts, promote social stability and harmony and world peace. He has been invited to the United Nations World Peace Conference for 10 times. His ideas have been praised by national experts and scholars, but realized that to speak of solutions in conferences is always "easier said than done."³⁰ Chin Kung thus understood, the importance of establishing an educational base which will successfully lead to building a harmonious society throughout the world.

Therefore, Chin Kung conducted an experiment in his hometown Lujiang, Anhui Province of China, set up a non-profit educational institutions, Lujiang Cultural Education Center. It trained teachers to promote Confucian ethical and moral education. Within three months: Families became more harmonious, neighborhoods quarreled less. There was a marked reduction of illegal activities. This experiment had attracted the attention of various countries, this mode was even recommended to UNESCO.³¹ Therefore Chin Kung believed people can be made good by teaching, and harmonious society can be achieved.

However, we can also find, "Religious Education" promoted by Chin Kung, is actually humanistic ethical and moral education under the banner of religion. He had reduced religion to a variety of secular ethics education, with the aim of achieving secular goals. The purpose of "Religious Education" is not to attain Nirvana, nor the respective ultimate

goals in major world religions. Rather it aims at the improvement of this world, a temporary liberation, rather than ultimate liberation. It resembles the ideal world of a Pure Land on earth in Humanistic Buddhism, a utopian society and so forth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be seen that although Chin Kung has never made the claim that he is an advocate of “Humanistic Buddhism”, his Buddhist theory of “Buddhism as Education” is consistent with main features of Humanistic Buddhism. The theory “Buddhism as Education” itself is a manifestation of one feature of Humanistic Buddhism, emphasizing rationality, with a de-emphasis on the sacred, mystical religious experiences and divine powers. Chin Kung’s application of “Buddhist Education”, namely his educational translation of a most influential Chinese Buddhist School, Pure Land Buddhism, and his social engagement with the founding of Buddhist Education, reflects Humanistic Buddhism’s focuses on this life, the improvement of this mundane world and its ideal of building a pure land on earth rather than seeking a pure land in other world. As discussed at the beginning, since Humanistic Buddhism has become a tendency in Chinese context, a mainstream and guideline of contemporary development of Chinese Buddhism, even if some Chinese Buddhists do not identify with the banner of Humanistic Buddhism, their ideological contents and trends may coincide with the aim of Chinese Humanistic Buddhism. Therefore, other than Chin Kung, it may be possible to find out many more “potential Humanistic Buddhists” in China. This thesis, as a beginning, hopes to offer a starting point for scholars who are interested in this possibility.

END NOTES

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¹⁵ 若有無量百千萬億眾生受諸苦惱，聞是觀世音菩薩，一心稱名，觀世音菩薩即時觀其音聲，皆得解脫。若有持是觀世音菩薩名者，設入大火，火不能燒，由是菩薩威神力故。(妙法蓮華經 T262 0056c06-10)

¹⁶ Xuan Hua. *Dafodingshou Lengyanjing Qianshi (A Simple Explanation of The Surangama Sutra)*. US Dharma Realm Buddhist Association China Office. 1990. 92-93.

¹⁷ Chin Kung. *Nianfo Chengfo (Mindfulness of Buddha, Being a Buddha)*. The Corporation Republic of Hwa Dzan Society, 2012. 17.

¹⁸ It refers to the world on Earth. The Five Turbidities are, 1. The age of people decreases and all kinds of diseases afflict people; 2. People's views start to degenerate; 3. Passions, delusions, desire, anger, stupidity, pride and doubt prevail; 4. Human miseries increase and happiness decreases; 5. The human lifespan gradually diminishes to ten years.

¹⁹ Chin Kung. *Nianfo Chengfo (Mindfulness of Buddha, Being a Buddha)*. The Corporation Republic of Hwa Dzan Society, 2012. 30-31.

²⁰ 一者孝養父母。奉事師長。慈心不殺。修十善業。二者受持三歸。具足眾戒。不犯威儀。三者發菩提心。深信因果。讀誦大乘。勸進行者。(佛說觀無量壽佛經 T365 0341c09-12)

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