

THE INFLUENCE OF THE BUDDHIST VIEW OF LIFE ON UNIVERSAL VALUE IN MODERN SOCIETY

Jianfu Lv

Shaanxi Normal University, China

Abstract

This paper deals with the Buddhist conception of life and its universal value for modern society. It suggests the manner in which Asian religions and other culture traditions can solve various social problems. We can no longer afford to solve problems with force of arms, and often our use of political, economic, legal, and other means to solve problems is ineffectual, but we can solve the problems through the old ways, of self control and self adjustment. These techniques are found in the ideas and resources of our religions and other related culture traditions, which can create more fundamental solutions to our problems.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้อภิปรายถึงความคิดเห็นเกี่ยวกับชีวิตและคุณค่าสากลของชีวิตสำหรับสังคมสมัยใหม่ตามหลักพุทธศาสนา บทความเสนอแนะวิธีที่ศาสนาวัฒนธรรม ประเพณีของเอเชียสามารถนำมาแก้ปัญหาสังคม เราไม่สามารถใช้อาวุธแก้ปัญหาได้อีกแล้ว อีกทั้งการที่เราเคยนำแนวทางทางการเมือง เศรษฐกิจ กฎหมาย หรือวิธีอื่น ๆ มาใช้แก้ปัญหาก็มักจะไม่ได้ผล แต่เราสามารถแก้ปัญหาได้โดยใช้วิธีดั้งเดิม นั่นก็คือ การควบคุมตนเองและการปรับตัว เทคนิคเหล่านี้หาได้จากแหล่งความคิดในแต่ละศาสนาและวัฒนธรรมประเพณีที่เกี่ยวข้อง ซึ่งสามารถสร้างสรรค์แนวทางแก้ไขปัญหาที่เป็นพื้นฐานมากกว่า

We are facing various problems in contemporary society, involving immorality, science, ecological imbalances, environmental pollution, political corruption, violence, war and terror activities, the corruption of rights, hegemonism, egoism, health and safety, hunger and death, etc. While environmental pollution, ecological destruction, resource exhaustion, are new social problems which have emerged with the development of modern science and industrial technology, other older problems are being aggravated. These problems whether old or new, essentially involve the human being. However, the problem of human being is not isolated, but is the problem of the relationship between human being with nonhuman nature.

Human beings have made great developments connected to civilization, including religion, philosophy, ethics, law, politics, economy, culture, science and so on, but they have been unable to solve the various problems which accompany this development. Thus, humanity is faced with an unprecedented predicament. Fortunately, we have already found the root of these problems, so we have some hope to solve them. Generally speaking, old problems are solved by old ways, yet even new problems we can also draw inspiration from the old ways to find new methods. People have made much effort in this direction, such as global ethics and religious dialogue, theories of harmonious society, ecological balance, controlling pollution and so on. These efforts are still in progress, and such solutions have received a high degree of consensus among the religions and within the academic fields. We can draw some comfort from this. I wish to contend that inspiration for new solutions to problems can also be found in Asian religion and other cultural traditions. Religions and other traditional thought systems do not use strong political power to intervene, what they do is take inspiration from old theories to propose some new ideas. This approach believes that transforming the world outlook can solve problems. There has been much research on Buddhism for more than 2,500 years, a tradition which had spread widely in Asia and has shown unique success. I wish to draw upon this tradition to show how it can set a common goal to solve problems in the contemporary global world.

The problems involving human beings are ultimately related to the relationship of the human to the crowd. Three Chinese characters,

Ren, compose a Chinese character, *Zhong*. It is so-called “three people are all”, that is to say, the problem of human being is the problem of crowd which consist of three *Ren*. They can be summarized as the human nature, human relations and human rights. Human nature implies that man has higher pursuit of spirit and life meaning, the human relations means one has a standard of the good and evil, and the human rights says that people in social activities should have human dignity. Human nature, human relations and human rights are respectively three levels of the problem, which are religions and philosophical, ethical and cultural, social and political. This is known as the Buddhist theory of life.

Since the human being is a part of nature, it has a natural essence. People are naturally the same as all the natural objects in their birth and a death, their obeying the laws of nature and their being driven by natural instinct. At the same time, people are higher animals with intelligence. As humans, we not only have consciousness and self-control, but we also exceed and control nature. This is the trait that leads to the root of human problems. Human nature as being both transcendental and instinctual, human relations being both normal and abnormal, and human rights involving both balance and imbalance, these bring forth most human problems.

It looks as if contemporary social problems are very different from those in prior history. It seems that science technology and the development of economy changed the whole world. But these new problems have no essential difference from the natural development of the human. The pace is merely accelerated. While human self-control haven't been improved and even declined as the development of society. Where religions and other culture traditions once provided purpose and the source of such values as self-control, contemporary society is controlled by science technology, and the economy. There is no purpose in its speed or in its goals.

Buddhism establishes the value of man through Buddha-nature theory and mind-nature theory. There is a famous saying in the *Mahāparinirvāna sūtra*, “all living beings have Buddha nature”,¹ that is to say, everyone has Buddha-nature. Moreover Buddhism think that man can fulfill value and believes *all living beings can become Buddha*,² that is to say, everyone even an icchantika (butcher) with a Buddha-nature

may attain Buddha-hood. As for the meaning of Buddha nature, different classics give different explanations from different angles. For example, the enlightenment of Four Noble Truths is the goal of life, or liberation from cycle of birth and death is the enlightenment state, or the void of own-nature is shunyata wisdom, or container consciousness () is ultimate existence, or nitya-sukha-atma-subha is four virtues of nirvana. In a word, the perfect and consummate of human nature is the supreme goal, which is a positive value system and consistent with value system of other major religions and philosophy and culture, even representing the mainstream value of human being. As for mind-nature theory, it is clean in essence, but defiled by external object (). Thus, one heart has two aspects in *the Awakening of Faith*, one is true *thusness* aspect of the mind which affirms the positive values of human nature, the other is ignorant *thusness* aspect of the mind which points out the negative effect of human nature. Sentient beings have impure heart, which means the heart is polluted by afflictions (kleśa). So there are various weaknesses in human nature, such as selfishness, mercenary tendencies, intrigue, dishonesty, committing massacres, flattery, bullying the weaker, using violence, cheating each other, spreading rumor, confusing right and wrong, and so on. The weakest points of human nature is so called “the three poisons”, including desire (), anger (dveṣa) and ignorance (moha). Desire is the first of these three poisons. It is the origin of heart problems, and all human’s fallabilities and error behavior come from this. Anger mainly consists of pleasure, anger, sadness, joy and other bad moods. Ignorance comprises stubborn and other paranoid tendency. Both are important factors leading to problems. The true *thusness* aspect of the mind is the initial state, the essence of human nature and the highest goal which people have been seeking. Ignorant *thusness* aspect of the mind is natural state and inevitable state of human nature, which people have to overcome and the object people need to cure. Therefore, Buddhism gives many approaches and methods of practice, from one’s own mind, the arousal of the thought, cultivating the mind, realization of heart to Buddhichitta, which constitute the main content of Buddhist scriptures. The doctrines of all religions are all to improve mind and perfect human nature.

All beings in Buddhism also include other life forms and inani-

mate matter. The one who live are called sentient beings, such as animals, plants and so on. The others are called insentient beings, such as stone, soil, wood, mountain, river, earth, sky and universe. Sentient beings have consciousness and feelings, including the six destinies and four forms of birth,³ which is often equated with humanity. Insentient beings are the physical environment of sentient beings, the natural world, although they don't have consciousness and feelings, they are produced and extinguished by origination, and have the internal causes and general rules for their movement and change. So Chinese Buddhism proposes a theory, *Insentient beings with nature*, and thinks the nature also has its own self-perfect time, which is called the best harmonizer. In this way, Buddhism breaks through the hedging-in tradition of Anthropocentrism, and extends the scope of the attention to all living things and inanimate nature, and finally creates a value system which is very useful.

Secondly, as for human relations, Buddhism distinguishes right from wrong and good from evil and believes that the improvement of the human nature is gradually perfected by stopping evil and advocating good deeds, from low to high, through ten stages () to perfection.

⁴There is a famous verse, *Seven Buddhas of the Jie, Not to do any evil, to cultivate good, to purify one's mind, this is the way of the Buddhas*.⁵This means that if you stop doing evil, advocate the good and cleanse your impure mind by yourself, you will surpass the good and evil, and achieve the perfect realm, which are the teachings of the Buddhas. According to the explanation of *Increased by One Agama*, all the commandments and the doctrines of the four *Agama Sutra* are all contained in this verse. The first two sentences address the behavior of people, advocating kindness to all living creatures, *showing mercy and alleviating the suffering of all living creatures*. The next sentence is refers to the human's mind. Avoiding the sins of body, mouth and mind means the purification of the individual. Among these, *Not to do any evil* is called the commandment door, the most fundamental of the laws, as long as you don't do evil things, you are living correctly at least with respect to means. But to cultivate good is called the advised method, *To do good and accumulate merit to purify the impure mind*. To purify one's mind is considered as the awakened method, the purity of self-nature lies in self-conscious, eliminating inverted understanding as well as all deluded thought, which purifies from

itself, and leads from the inevitable kingdom to the free kingdom.

The verse of seven Buddhas commandment is from precept to self-enlightenment, and accurately expresses the basic spirit of religions ethics, and can be seen as the common program of most religions concerning the human morality, as well as has the values of definition for religion. This definition of religion would be namely: *not to do any evil, to cultivate good, to purify one's mind, this is the teaching of the Buddhas.*

But this can be extended the common principle of the whole human ethics, that is *Not to do any evil, to cultivate good, to purify one's mind.* Edification not only includes religion, but also comprises education and other thought and ethical systems in secular society. As a matter of fact, the commonality of all religions and secular education lies in the ethical principle of resisting evil and advocating virtue.

Concerning what is good and what is evil, different religions and ideological culture systems give different answers. But Buddhism also has its own definition which can be useful for us. What is good and evil? *Favorableness is called good, harm is called evil, neither favorableness nor harm is unworthy to be discussed* 善惡宜論, *Dacheng yizhang*,⁶ which means more and more favorable is called the good, more and more harmful is called evil, without the harmless is called not worthy discussing. *Favorableness is good, good means benefit, favorableness means the positive benefit. Contravening is contrary, harm means the damage, harm is the opposite of benefit.* There is a further explanation in *Dacheng yizhang* (Essay on the Meaning of). Good is divided into three levels from primary to high level, primary good flows with positive for good, and has rising trend. According to the definition, the good deeds of Sentient beings, men and gods in the three realms are all called good.⁷ Despite this idea of good as possessing positive benefits, it is still contaminated goodness, and still retains the affliction of habit energies, which deviates us from our complete control of desire and mood. And no-outflow (an srava) which can eliminate affliction is the good in middle rank. Following the law which is voice-hearer () and pratyekabuddha's the good law is the standard of this good. The senior good follows nature, and dharma-realm (Dharmadh tu) is its original nature (tman). The practice of oneself is according to the essence of human nature, ,

三业清淨, which is the good deeds of practice of Buddhas and Bodhisattva. And the good is divided into three levels in *Mahāvairocana-bhīṣa-bodhi-vikurvit-dhī-h-na-vaipulyas-tra* and its commentary. The primary good is good act in secular world, the intermediate good is the domestic good, the senior good is the Buddhism good. The standard of the good is the degree of the good heart. The good act in secular world is to honor parents and treat relatives well. The domestic good involves friendliness to acquaintances, as well as respect for virtuous friends (kalyāna-mitra) and those possessing expertise and authority. The good in Buddhism is Great kindness and Great compassion as well as benefits for all living creatures.

Compared with the good, evil has three kinds. One is contrary to the right and harmful to present, this is related to human suffering and animal desire (tiryag-yoni). The second is against the law, which violates the basic principles of Buddhism and specific rules. According to this definition, impure good actions in this world can also be evil. The third is against truth and nature, and based on deluded minds (false minds), which are not according with the highest interests, and imperfect. According to this definition, the impure good actions of Śrāvaka, Pratyekabuddha and Bodhisattva belong to evil actions.⁸

According to the Theory of *Consciousness-only* (Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi-śāstra), both this world and the next are standards of good and evil. The good is not only for the sake of this world, but also for the next world. For instance, if happiness is only experienced in the present, and not in the future, it would not be true happiness. Likewise for evil, not only does evil have an influence in the present, but also in the future world. If the three-durgati would be only suffered in the present, but not in the future world, it would not be the completely evil. ⁹This world and the future world of good and evil can be understood in three levels of relationship, which is: this time and at that time; self and others; and individual and whole. This is related to transmigration, which is a life cycle, and is a time cycle. The past, present, and future form a cycle. So good and evil are all limited by action and related to the present and future. Good is gradually accumulated in terms of perfection. And evil is gradually decreased so as to die out.

The profit and loss as well as the world and the future world are the standards of good and evil in Buddhism. Good measure is divided

into three levels from low to high and has universal values. The profit and loss is also the basic principle of good and evil in the modern society, and the whole interests of humanity is the standard. The purpose of every religion is to advocate good and stop evil, and only differ with respect to the standards of the good and evil. The idea of good and evil of the world religions goes beyond class, nation, and collective, and is considered as based on the overall interests of all mankind. All of the world's religions have an ultimate goal, the perfect good, which is the final purpose of the whole of humanity. Most religious practitioners try to avoid evil and do good. As long as the law and other activities in secular society conform to the benefit of the public, they are the primary good.

Human rights is really the equal rights of human being. In Buddhism, equality is reflected not only in social practice, but also in the law. So it claims that the original nature of all dharmas is equal. At the beginning of Buddhism, Śākyamuni put forward that four castes are all equal and said that as long as everyone belonging to any caste does Buddhist practice, they are called śākya and equal. Later, Buddhism raises all beings as equal, and further declares all laws are equal. Finally, it even thinks Buddha dharma is equal. Equality is ~~the basic idea of Buddhism.~~

Buddhism thinks all things and phenomena originated from fate and are equal in nature, which is called the equality of laws, and also is the evidence of dharma equality. For example, *The Great Collection Scripture* () thinks three realms and Buddha dharma have no differences. Three realms are equal and dharma is equality. All method is also equal, as method is dharma, and has no distinction.¹⁰ And say, *regarding the equality of all dharma by my view of equality and regarding the equal of all the living creature by the equal of all dharma means the equal of Buddha, dharma, living creature, the mercy and even the unrealities. The view of equality names the holy right view.*¹¹ All beings and I are equal with Buddha, because Buddha and all beings have Buddha nature, which is the inner basis of the equality. All beings and Buddha are equal in essence, which is the inner evidence of people's equal rights, and also the essence of human rights.

Based on this view of equality, Buddhism's religious practices treat everything equally, especially for every person with equal heart, which is the basic requirement of the Bodhisattva. For example, *Bodhisattva-*

śāra thinks everyone should be treated with equal mind, which is the mind of *Bodhisattva*. *Vajra śīva* also thinks one who understands all living things has equal rights and this true Buddhist nature is called *Bodhisattva*.

Human rights in modern society are mainly built on political and social considerations. These rights have not been completely and adequately respected. The main reason is the serious inequalities in modern society, not only among individuals, but also among classes, nationalities, countries, and interest groups. These take many forms: economic “law of the jungle” attitudes, to power politics, bureaucratic corruption, plunder of resources, and the trafficking of women and children. This leads to the sorry state of human rights in modern society.

The Buddhist view of equality gives us some enlightenment about how to solve such problems. Firstly, all sentient beings have equal rights, which are not only between man and man, but also between human and other livings, even between humans and nature. Secondly, all laws are equal, which not only exist between all things and phenomena, but also observing all things and phenomenon with equal mind. Everyone is equal, rights are shared together, and obligations are fulfilled together, which are the basic ideas of life in Buddhism, and has a positive significance.

The pure human nature, doing good deeds, not evil and the equality of all living things are the basic ideas and attitude of Buddhism about human being, which has the universal value in the modern society. But the whole life theory of Buddhism is generally considered as pessimistic and negative, and not received by modern society. In fact, the life theory of Buddhism is a kind of optimism which includes pessimism, and where the positive includes the negative. Its essence is a positive view of life, and also has a universal value.

Endnotes

¹CBETA, T12, no. 374, p. 402, c8-9.

²Lilita-vistara, vol.8, CBETA, T03, no. 186, p. 537, c17.

³The six destinies. Six kinds of rebirth in *sāra* that are undergone by sentient beings in accord with their good or evil actions carried out in their previous lifetime. These are: hell, hungry ghost, animal, asura, human and god. The first

three are the result of predominantly good karma while the last three are the result of predominantly evil karma. Also written as. Four forms of birth. (1) Born naturally, born from oneself. (2) That which is born through spontaneous generation. A sentient being suddenly appearing from nowhere, for example, the birth of a ghost. (3) In contrast to other types of birth, (i.e., from an egg, from a womb, from moisture) a species that is born suddenly without a specific origin. This refers especially to the intermediate stage after death, where beings are reborn as spirits, gods, hell-beings, etc. (-yoni).

⁴() The ‘ten stages’. means “stage” and the ten are the forty-first through the fiftieth stages in the path of the bodhisattva, which are designated as one through ten. In various texts, each of the stages is associated with the subjugation or elimination of a certain type of obstruction to enlightenment. The ten are: 1. huanxidi – The ‘stage of joy’. (pramudiā) The stage where the wisdom of the middle path is first produced to benefit self and others, and where there is great happiness. 2. – ligoudi – ‘freedom from defilement’. (vimalā) Dwelling in the principle of the middle path, to be able to enter the dust of the world of sentient beings, yet remain detached. 3. fanguangdi – the ‘stage of emission of light’. (prabh) The stage of following the buddha-path and emitting the clear light of wisdom. 4. yanhuidi – The ‘stage of glowing wisdom’. (arcimat) The stage of the light of wisdom burning bright according to its clear cognition of the unborn nature of all existence. 5. nanshengdi – The ‘stage of overcoming the difficult’. (sudurjay) The 克服難行 overcoming the prior stage by emptying all ignorance. 6. xianqiandi – The ‘stage of manifestation of reality’. (abhimukh) The stage where the practitioner is facing reality. The stage of manifestation of the aspect that in contemplating the dharma, nirvana and sams are not two. 7. yuanxingdi – the ‘stage of far-reaching’. (dūramgamā) The stage of attaining the middle way and advancing to a higher realm with every thought. 8. budongdi – The ‘immovable stage’. (acal) The stage of abiding peacefully in the wisdom of (no aspects) of the middle path without change. 9. shanhuidi – The ‘stage of wondrous wisdom’. (sādhumatī) The stage of using the skill of wisdom contemplation to enter the path of clear cognition regarding the unborn nature of all existence. 10. fayundi – the ‘stage of the dharma-cloud’. (dharma-megha) The stage of attaining the level of buddhahood, and covering the dharma-world with wisdom and compassion like a great cloud. In the doctrine of the Faxiang 法相 school, the stage of ‘equal enlightenment’ () is included here, being considered as within the limits of bodhisattva practice.

⁵*Increased by One Agama Sūtras*. vol.1, , , , CBETA, T02, no. 125, p. 551, a13-14.

⁶The seven buddhas of the past. First Vipā yi, and ikhi, Viśabhā, Krakucchanda, Kanakamuni, K yapa, kyamuni.

⁷(Sui)huiyuan *Dacheng yizhang*, vol.2, CBETA, T44, no. 1851, p. 503, c3.

⁸The “form realm”, which is the second of the three realms 三界 (1) Exist-

