

Faith, Karma, Beings, Practice, Frugality: Humanistic Buddhism System and Practice

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Abstract: Humanistic Buddhism, with its core tenets of grounding itself in the human realm, attaining Buddhahood, and benefiting sentient beings, promotes the transformation of Buddhism toward greater engagement with the world and integration into daily life. This article systematically examines the classic foundations, ideological implications, and internal logic of Humanistic Buddhism, focusing on five key concepts: faith, cause and effect, sentient beings, spiritual practice, and frugality. It explores the contemporary significance and practical pathways for cultivating Humanistic Buddhist practices in today's world. The study finds that these five perspectives mutually support and organically unify to form a comprehensive intellectual framework for Humanistic Buddhism. In the face of contemporary societal challenges—such as spiritual emptiness, utilitarianism, moral decay, and social alienation—these five perspectives can offer valuable guidance for individuals seeking inner peace, moral self-discipline, and effective social governance. In the new era, Buddhist practice must uphold right belief, clearly understand cause and effect, embody compassion, pursue pragmatic cultivation, and embrace frugality while rejecting extravagance, thereby contributing to the high-quality development of Buddhism in China through its localization, modernization, and integration into everyday life.

Keywords: Humanistic Buddhism; Faith; Cause and Effect; Sentient Beings; Cultivation and Study; Frugality; Sinicization of Buddhism

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

The secularization and rationalization brought about by the modernization and transformation of contemporary society have made it increasingly difficult for the traditional Buddhist approach—characterized by an emphasis on transcendence and a neglect of practical, real-world engagement—to meet the needs of today's society. To promote the modern transformation of Buddhism, Master Taixu proposed “Buddhism for Life,” advocating that the teachings of the Buddha be deeply rooted in the practice of everyday life^[1]. Building upon Master Taixu's ideas, Master Yinshun further refined the theoretical framework and formally established the core tenets of Humanistic Buddhism, adhering to the guiding principle of “the Buddha arises from the human realm; one becomes a Buddha through engaging fully in human life; benefiting oneself and others.” Subsequently, eminent monks such as Xingyun and Sheng Yen continued to advance and innovate Humanistic Buddhism, driving its integration into daily life, social engagement, and internationalization, thereby making it the mainstream development model

of contemporary Han Chinese Buddhism. Against the backdrop of the new era's efforts to Sinicize Buddhism, Humanistic Buddhism, as an important practical vehicle for localizing and modernizing Buddhism, holds immense research value and practical significance^[16].

Today, while our society has achieved a high level of material civilization, consumerism and utilitarianism have spread unchecked, giving rise to a host of spiritual and social dilemmas—including a loss of faith among the general public, moral decline, psychological anxiety, interpersonal alienation, and ecological imbalance. The core principles advocated by Humanistic Buddhism—such as right belief, cause and effect, compassion, pragmatism, and frugality—are deeply rooted in the original teachings of Buddhism and resonate with the core values of modern society. These principles can effectively bring inner peace and well-being to individuals, guide ethical behavior in the broader community, and help resolve various social conflicts. Based on this understanding, this article constructs a systematic framework for the Humanistic Buddhist thought system around five key principles, analyzes its contemporary value, current challenges, and practical approaches, and thus demonstrates both theoretical innovation and practical relevance.

1.2 Research Status and Research Innovation

By reviewing the current state of academic research, we find that domestic studies on Humanistic Buddhism in China are abundant^[6], primarily focusing on four main areas: tracing the intellectual lineage of eminent masters, elucidating the core characteristics, analyzing practical social case studies, and exploring the adaptation of Buddhism to Chinese cultural contexts^[9]. However, overall, these studies suffer from fragmented research perspectives, insufficient exploration of the intrinsic connections among the five core concepts, marginalization of research on the concept of frugality^[8], and an overemphasis on theory at the expense of practice. Meanwhile, the Japanese academic community has been deeply engaged in the study of Chinese Humanistic Buddhism for many years^[10], concentrating on such research directions as comparative studies of modernization between Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, overseas dissemination, and addressing contemporary spiritual crises^[21]. While their perspectives are diverse and their arguments rigorous^[26], they similarly exhibit shortcomings, notably neglecting the logical connections among the core concepts and the dimension of integrating frugal living into daily spiritual practice^[13].

This article employs the methods of literature review, comparative study, and theory-practice integration, and follows a logical framework that unfolds as “Tracing the Origins of Doctrines—Constructing a System—Diagnosing the Current Situation—Optimizing Pathways—Drawing Conclusions and Looking Ahead.” Compared with existing research, the main innovations of this article lie in the following aspects: In terms of perspective, it systematically constructs a comprehensive ideological framework based on five core keywords, thereby addressing the fragmented nature of current studies; in terms of content, it formally incorporates frugality into the core ideological system of Humanistic Buddhism, filling a gap in academic research; and in terms of logic, it establishes a clearly hierarchical conceptual framework, significantly enhancing the systematicity and logical coherence of the study.

2. The Doctrinal Implications and Systematic Logic of the Five Core Concepts of Humanistic Buddhism

2.1 The Doctrinal Implications of the Five Core Concepts

The humanistic Buddhist thought system primarily comprises five core concepts: faith, cause and effect, sentient beings, practice and study, and frugality—all of which are supported by canonical texts and mutually reinforce one another, making them well-suited for contemporary human-centered practice. Faith is the foundation of spiritual cultivation; as stated in the “Xian Shou Chapter” of the Avatamsaka Sutra, “Faith is the source of the path and the mother of all meritorious virtues, nurturing all good dharmas”^[5]. Humanistic Buddhism emphasizes rational and upright faith, wisdom-based faith, and pure faith—distinguished from secular superstition and utilitarian worship. Grounded in the principle of dependent origination and emptiness, it upholds the unity of belief and practice and focuses on cultivating virtue in this very life. The Three Treasures faith advocated by Master Taixu highlights the humanistic Buddhist characteristic of placing people at the center and engaging in worldly practice.

The concept of cause and effect is the core moral principle of Humanistic Buddhism. As recorded in the “Anguttara Nikaya,”

“Good deeds lead to good consequences, while evil deeds bring about evil consequences”. Rooted in the doctrine of dependent origination, this concept holds that “one’s destiny is shaped by one’s own actions, and blessings are sought through one’s own efforts,” thereby rejecting fatalism and emphasizing that good and evil in this life will inevitably bear fruit. It encourages people to abandon evil, cultivate virtue, benefit themselves, and benefit others^[7]. Master Xingyun points out that a sound understanding of cause and effect serves as an essential foundation for personal self-cultivation and social stability, and also provides crucial support for the social development of Humanistic Buddhism^[3].

The concept of “all sentient beings” represents the ultimate value orientation of Humanistic Buddhism, establishing the core idea that all sentient beings are equal and capable of attaining Buddhahood. Upholding the Bodhisattva spirit of “great compassion without attachment and great empathy rooted in the shared essence of all beings”^[2], Humanistic Buddhism dispels discriminatory attachments and respects the inherent nature of all sentient beings. Its compassion is primarily manifested in practical actions in this present life, advocating for the betterment of society through benevolent deeds such as public welfare, care for living beings, and ecological conservation—thus putting into practice the principle of benefiting and delighting all sentient beings.

Cultivation is the key pathway for putting the Dharma into practice, requiring that theoretical study and practical cultivation be integrated and pursued in parallel^[4]. The Humanistic Buddhism advocates a way of life-oriented cultivation, breaking down the boundaries between practice and daily life and treating everyday activities, work, and living as venues for spiritual practice^[15]. It rejects the pitfalls of mere theoretical talk and attachment to formalities, thereby achieving a balanced and complete cultivation that harmoniously integrates wisdom and virtue.

2.2 The Logical Structure of the Five Core Concepts

The Five Principles constitute a comprehensive, progressive, and unified Buddhist practice system for the human realm^[14]. Among them, faith serves as the spiritual core, cause and effect as the guiding principle of conduct, sentient beings as the original aspiration for cultivation, study and practice as the path of realization, and frugality as the foundation of cultivation. These five elements mutually support one another, forming a complete logical chain: “Establishing right faith in the heart, grounding conduct in cause and effect, setting aspirations based on sentient beings, charting a path through study and practice, and cultivating integrity through frugality”^[22]. Ultimately, this leads to the cultivation goal of benefiting oneself and others, achieving perfect blessings and wisdom, and building a pure land in the human world^[27].

3. The Contemporary Significance and Practical Challenges of Humanistic Buddhism in Modern Practice

3.1 The Contemporary Relevance of Spiritual Practice

In the contemporary social context, the five core tenets of Humanistic Buddhism demonstrate remarkable practical relevance and can generate positive value across multiple dimensions—individual, interpersonal, societal, and ecological. Faced with the widespread challenges of modern society—material abundance coupled with spiritual emptiness, public anxiety, and existential confusion—Humanistic Buddhism’s rational and authentic belief system, which rejects superstition and utilitarianism in faith, offers modern people a spiritually enriching framework that is closely aligned with daily life and grounded in reason. This helps individuals find inner peace, stabilize their minds and bodies, and rebuild a robust and sustainable spiritual belief system. In response to current issues such as the rampant spread of utilitarianism, moral decay, and the erosion of integrity, the concept of cause and effect, verifiable in this very life, provides the public with clear guidelines for distinguishing between good and evil and serves as a powerful moral compass. It encourages people to abandon wrongdoing, cultivate virtue, practice honesty and altruism, thereby effectively purifying social norms and maintaining social stability.

Meanwhile, the Buddhist concept of universal equality and great compassion for all beings can help dispel the public’s self-centered attachments, cultivate a compassionate disposition characterized by inclusiveness and altruism^[23], and alleviate interpersonal alienation and indifference in modern society^[24]. The practical and down-to-earth approach to spiritual cultivation, which emphasizes living in the present moment and practicing mindfulness in daily life, helps people relieve the restlessness, anxiety, and mental exhaustion caused by the pressures of contemporary society, thus achieving harmony and

unity between body and mind ^[25]. The principles of frugality, minimal desires, cherishing blessings, and cultivating gratitude can effectively curb the extravagance, waste, and excessive greed brought about by consumerism, guiding people toward a simple and low-carbon lifestyle and fostering harmonious coexistence between humans and nature ^[30].

3.2 The Realistic Dilemmas of Contemporary Spiritual Practice

Currently, the secular practice of Humanistic Buddhism still faces numerous real-world challenges, and the implementation of its five core principles has encountered varying degrees of deviation. At the level of faith, some believers lack sufficient understanding, leading to the distortion of their beliefs—either by becoming obsessed with supernatural powers of ghosts and deities, blindly indulging in superstition, or reducing spiritual practice to mere utilitarianism. Commercialization reduces Buddhist practice to a transaction aimed at acquiring blessings and benefits, thereby straying from the core, rational, and authentic original intention. On the level of cause and effect, the public's interpretation of the teachings is often one-sided: either falling into passive fatalism and abandoning subjective spiritual cultivation, or denying the law of cause and effect altogether and indulging unrestrainedly in personal desires, thus triggering a moral decline at the individual level and social disorder ^[18]. At the level of practice, many practitioners suffer from severe self-centered thinking and lack a strong sense of compassion and altruism. They focus solely on their own personal cultivation and comfort, ignoring the suffering of sentient beings and the public good, thus deviating from the Bodhisattva spirit of benefiting and delighting all beings. At the study and learning level, there is widespread disconnect between theory and practice, as well as an imbalance between merit and wisdom. Many engage in mere verbal discussions of doctrines without applying them to daily life, fixating instead on secluded, otherworldly retreats, which leads to a hollow and formalistic practice ^[20]. In terms of frugality, influenced by consumerism, practitioners' minds have become less inclined toward simplicity and contentment; extravagance and competitive displays of wealth have become increasingly common. Moreover, some religious institutions have shown signs of secularization, contradicting the traditional practice of valuing simplicity and shunning luxury.

4. Contemporary Optimization Paths and Conclusions for Humanistic Buddhism Practice

4.1 Contemporary Practice Paths for Optimizing Spiritual Cultivation

In response to the various challenges facing contemporary humanistic Buddhist practice, and drawing on the core tenets of the five major concepts, we can develop a systematic and practical path for optimizing spiritual cultivation. First, we must uphold orthodox faith in our practice, clearly distinguishing between genuine faith and superstitious or utilitarian beliefs. We should resist the rampant trends of Buddhist superstition and commercialization, reject deviant practices such as worshipping ghosts and spirits or engaging in ritualistic exchanges for blessings, and insist on the unity of belief and action, integrating rational and authentic faith into daily life ^[19]. Second, we should embrace causal-based practice, widely promoting the concept of karmic causality in this present life, dispelling misconceptions about fatalism and the emptiness of causality, cultivating a deep sense of reverence for karma, and guiding practitioners to proactively abandon evil and cultivate goodness, using the principles of cause and effect as a regular framework to guide their words and deeds.

Third, we must put into practice compassionate cultivation, spreading the teachings of universal equality and profound compassion that sees all beings as one, thereby dismantling self-centered attachments, nurturing a selfless disposition, and actively engaging in social practices such as public welfare, care for life, and ecological conservation, thus contributing to the harmonious development of society ^[31]. Fourth, we should promote everyday-life-oriented cultivation, firmly upholding the principle of integrating practice with insight and cultivating both merit and wisdom. We should embrace the philosophy that “daily life itself is a spiritual sanctuary,” breaking down the barriers between spiritual practice and daily living, balancing theoretical study with practical application, and eliminating the pitfalls of empty theorizing and spiritual practice divorced from reality ^[28]. Fifth, we must adhere to a simple and austere approach to cultivation, emphasizing the importance of minimal desires, contentment, cherishing blessings, and valuing frugality. By combating extravagance and competitive consumption, curbing material greed, and embracing a simple lifestyle, we can cultivate a pure and serene state of mind and solidify the foundation of our spiritual practice ^[29].

4.2 Research Conclusions

In summary, Humanistic Buddhism centers on faith, cause and effect, sentient beings, spiritual practice, and frugality, thereby establishing a modern Buddhist ideological system that is logically coherent, attuned to the times, and practically implementable. It represents an important achievement in the transformation and development of traditional Buddhism and in advancing the Sinicization of Buddhism^[12]. Against the backdrop of frequent spiritual, moral, and ecological crises in modern society, the five core tenets of Humanistic Buddhism can effectively help individuals achieve inner peace and physical well-being, purify social norms, foster harmonious interpersonal relationships, and promote a virtuous cycle in the ecosystem—possessing profound contemporary value^[11]. In the new era, the practice of Humanistic Buddhism must steadfastly uphold the core principles of right belief, clear understanding of cause and effect, compassion for all beings, practical engagement in spiritual cultivation, and diligence and self-discipline^[17], thereby overcoming various malpractices in spiritual practice. The disease continues to drive the Buddhist way of life toward greater integration into society, socialization, and adaptation to the times, fully leveraging its vital role in benefiting humanity and nurturing the spiritual civilization of society^[19].

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