

Humanistic Buddhism and Challenges of Modern Life: A Philosophical Overview

By Naichen Chen

ABSTRACT

Each age has its special challenges for human beings, but the main problems have always remained the same, though different in appearance and ways. These problems can be effectively dealt with and solved only by changing our thinking and attitude towards our lives, the world, and ourselves. Modern people have greatly benefited from science and technology, but the challenges they encounter are even more sophisticated and complex. As the essence of the Buddha's teachings is humanistic, we can learn from them and make full application of them to positively guiding our way in modern life.

Sometimes, in a sense, it is not so appropriate to say that modern life is different from the life of any other age, before or after it. It is true that our life changes from time to time, therefore it is surely appropriate to say that lives are impermanent and are always different. But, do lives at different points (if there is any point) or during different periods of time (if there is a so-called period) basically differ? This is a more sophisticated philosophical issue. When we talk about life, no matter in what age, we mean the nature of life, in general and at all times. In this ontological approach to "life," we are then looking for a universal answer to the question asked above.

When the answer is a universal one, it means everyone as ordinary as us can really experience that kind of feeling toward life, if we are honest and sensitive enough. Every one of us lives our lives each day, but most do not really feel or do not feel at all about their lives as those lives truly are. Buddhist philosophers are among those who can not only sensitively experience life, but also become enlightened about the nature and rules in life.

What kinds of challenges have modern human beings and modern human societies encountered and thus had to face, reduce, and solve? Are human problems always the same if they are viewed historically and horizontally?

We may ask one question which is pertinent to this issue. Are modern people becoming happier when technological invention and its application rapidly spread and penetrate into each minor cell and become an inseparable part of human life? In a certain sense, and theoretically, people should feel more comfortable and satisfied due to the convenience and efficiency science and technology have brought to humans. But much evidence has shown that the truth is just to the contrary.

Science and technology have solved many problems, but in the meantime, even more new problems have appeared, though of different kinds and in different ways. Many wise observers and thinkers have rightly concluded that neither science nor knowledge alone can solve fundamental problems of human beings. It also seems clear

that material satisfaction sometimes can do nothing to elevate the spiritual condition and human happiness unless the satisfaction itself can be viewed correctly and transferred into positive power in life. It is true that all of us in this modern age have greatly benefited from science and technology. It must be admitted that we are really lucky to be born in an age of high tech and scientific progress. High tech things are really good, but they are not good enough to solve all our problems. They bring about pleasure and comfort to human life, but cannot totally replace life itself. Neither can they terminate our innermost sorrow and suffering generated from elsewhere without the aid of other necessary conditions.

Science and technology themselves are neither “good” nor “bad” per se. They are judged only by human beings, and only by those for whom that science and technology have become useful, beneficial, or harmful. That is why we must later in this article discuss the real meaning of happy life, and make some suggestions about how to make people happier based on the Buddha’s teachings. We are now gradually approaching the core of Humanistic Buddhism, which in one sense means exploring the implications and application of the Buddha’s teachings to an improvement of human life.

No matter how each age is different in human history, it seems that some basic problems are always the same. It is exactly what the Buddha said about two thousand five hundred years ago that human beings, in general, have some basic weaknesses, which fundamentally are related to the flaws in ideas and personality. They are shown either by human illusion and misunderstanding of reality due to the lack of genuine wisdom, or by imperfection in disposition, such as greediness and the inability to achieve emotional balance at all times. Even the latter flaws can be attributed to the lack of genuine wisdom.¹ These are very often in a negative cycle, which places people in a kind of reincarnation—not only the kind after life, but also in this present life, and very often just at this moment.

If human beings continue to maintain those weaknesses in vision, ideas, understanding, behavior, and character, their problems will inevitably remain the same. The only difference is in the form and appearance. Suffering and inner vacuum continue to exist. These differences are caused merely by the change of outer human conditions and situations. This principle also applies to modern society and human situations.

Modern people have the same problems in nature as ancient humans did, in whatever age of the past, though in different form and appearance. Basically I would be hesitant to say that modern people have different problems from those of their ancestors. I prefer to say that human history is just one type of reincarnation, one of many cycles including different types of “birth” and “death.” That is basically a repetition of something again and again. I am more inclined to identify and state the compelling sameness of human historical events in their nature. Although it is necessary and appropriate to pay attention to the varied outcomes due to different human conditions in history, we may say that most people most of the time are overwhelmed with similar negative causes, i.e., human ignorance, lack of intelligent understanding and judgment, greediness, self-centered and selfish decisions, negative

emotional turbulence, etc.

Human beings are now facing the turning point of the new twenty-first century. They do experience a rich and glorious life. They enjoy the sweet fruit created by science and technology. They also take advantage of them to achieve an almost perfect efficiency in work, life, and physical comfort. But this does not imply that they face less trouble than humanity did previously. Modern challenges, whatever they are, so far have not stirred people to do more self-reflection over their problems and their own weaknesses. It is evident that more guidance and education are needed to lead ordinary people to see the reality of their situation, and even more important, of themselves.

Some of the issues that modern people should attend to more are:

1. How can we solve the problems of environmental and spiritual pollution?
2. What can we do to eliminate rivalry, conflict, hatred, and war between races, political parties, countries, institutions, persons, family members, and others?
3. We can see that there are still a lot of schools, governments, teachers, parents, political parties, and other leaders who do not teach people the truth about the world and about life. They either do not know the truth, or dislike telling the truth. Without doubt, they cannot or will not teach people ways to achieve individual holistic development and genuine happiness. They do not provide healthy environments and facilities necessary for such development. What can we do to make all kinds of educational institutions function well enough, at least, to lessen such human ignorance and negative intention?
4. People are used to taking for granted what appears as reality, and make no effort to explore the truth. More often than not, they remain stuck with bias and misunderstanding. They are not humble enough to learn to correct themselves. They remain as foolish as they have ever been, and the same negative habits are retained for a long time, without any sign of change or improvement. What and how shall we teach people to change their behavior?

Now I would like to ask, "What is happiness?" "What does happiness mean in terms of Buddhism?" In order to answer these questions, "happiness" must first be defined.

Overwhelmed by a great variety of value systems and beliefs, confused with various statements and assertions in the mass media, and puzzled by the radical change of tempo in life and institutions, modern people have become more and more nervous. They are anxious to know what happiness really means.

According to the Logical Atomists, Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, for instance,² any effort directed toward the defining of the ultimate concept of particles will be doomed to failure, since they are atomic, the simplest form which cannot be

analyzed further. Anyone who tries to force himself/herself to define them will unavoidably fall into a cyclic tautology. Nothing will really be said in such a cycling action and no genuine meaning of that concept will be unveiled. Only complex concepts (terms), the combination of simple concepts or ideas, can be analyzed and thus defined. How can we “know” these simplest or ultimate particle type “things”? The only way is to “experience” them by ourselves—not through logical reasoning or dialectical contemplation, but through first and most direct contact of our sense organs, by way of our inner “feeling,” or by the integration of our intuitive powers.

One can come to grips with those complex ideas or concepts by analysis: the deconstruction of the simple factors comprising them, and the discernment of all these factors and their structural articulation.

Happiness should be a complex idea or concept. However, I also believe that a complex idea can be “experienced” by the one who is thinking or reflecting on it. Analysis is just one of the methods that we can apply to understanding, defining, and realizing functions. Happiness is a concept which can be understood either by analysis of its factors and articulation, by intuitive experience of the thinker, or by both.

Happiness can be analyzed in several structural groups:

1. Substantial happiness versus that of feeling: Is it a real, substantial happiness or just a certain kind of gathered feeling of an illusory existence of happiness?
2. Physical happiness versus mental happiness: Ancient Greek philosopher, Epicurus, distinguished the mental kind of happiness from the physical one and asserted that the former is superior to the latter.³ Such a real happiness in one’s psychic aspect results from a peaceful and tranquil state of the inner world of the mind, and has nothing to do with physical satisfaction or any acquisition from the outside world.⁴
3. Happiness in this life versus happiness beyond or after this life. The suffering one who lives in this life tries to balance himself/herself psychically by presupposing a paradise beyond. Some religions and philosophies believe that human lives will persist when physical bodies are gone. The other side of the pole is nothing more than a present pleasure.⁵
4. Quantity and quality of happiness, and the criteria for measuring happiness as suggested by the British Utilitarian philosophers.⁶
5. Aristotle contended that happiness is a constant practice of virtues in daily life based on the Golden Mean, though the worldly benefits such as health, fortune, friendship, and reputation will definitely add to our feeling of happiness.⁷
6. Plato believed that perfect truth, beauty, and goodness exist only in the world of reality, while all kinds of satisfaction in the world of phenomena are temporary, illusionary, and flawed. The world of reality (Plato created the use of Idee or Form in this indication) is the place where we can achieve permanent and perfect happiness, and this implies that truth, beauty, and goodness are three basic

elements of a happy life.⁸

The above examples show that some philosophers are inclined to an analysis of the dualistic approach. In this case, some ignore neither, and some prefer one to the other.

Buddhist philosophers will say that the human world is always in change and not permanent, wherein everything we see, we sense, and we own right at this moment, is merely a temporal combination of causes and conditions. This assertion is based on the theory of dependent origination.⁹ All causes and conditions appear in the context of time and space, as do all existents resulted from a causes-and-conditions combination. They are all temporal, but they are also real, because they do exist, no matter how short the time of its occurrence, existence and appearance. Sometimes we are happy, sometimes not, but this kind of emotion or feeling emerges in as quickly a time as a fraction of a second. It is real that we “were” happy or we “were not” happy. This is a fact that can scarcely be denied by anyone. Sometimes that feeling remains in our memory for the rest of our life. We even believe that it will survive our present life. Therefore, a feeling like this can most likely be as short as a flash, yet it will seemingly last forever. It seems that the length of duration of anything relevant to us depends upon our “consciousness.” It is we who decide and picture our conception, experience, sensation, and feelings of ourselves, of the outside world, and of the beings in it as well.

If we can grasp the nature and the rules of change, we will become wiser with a correct understanding of all. We are then nearer to being liberated from the suffering created by our own ignorance, egocentrism, misunderstanding, and greed. The lesson that lies here is that we should have real knowledge of ourselves and the surrounding world. This is the key to opening the door to gaining mastery over our emotions and desires, instead of being a slave to them. The state of Nirvana is a perfect tranquility and freedom of one’s existence, on the one hand, and a complete potential readiness for reaction and action whenever desirable and necessary, on the other. The nature of that state is static, while its application is always there and ready. The Buddhist philosophers also believe that this present life is just one part or one period of an endless chain of life, which enfolds during and transforms again after the present life. Those beings who have not obtained enlightenment to a certain high level will certainly transform themselves into any of six realms based on individual karma. Karma is the influential power or effective impact accumulated and remaining from what one has done previously.

It is not smart to ignore the present life in order to pursue the life after.¹⁰ The fact is that each period of life is connected. These period of life look as though they are divided at different phases, but they are not. They are all parts of one life, one being, or one existence. The power of karma, unless appropriately relieved and balanced, is influential over all our future lives and in the meantime merges as components into our genes and heredity. That kind of power becomes part of our collective and individual conscious. Unless one has obtained enlightenment, self-cultivation, and merits to a very high level, that of Arhat or Bodhisattva, it is very hard to say that he/she will be reborn as a human being again in the next life. Therefore, the Sutra says that it is a privilege and honor to be born a human being. It is therefore important for every

human being to embrace every opportunity to learn, to purify his/her mind, to improve ideas and attitudes, to guide karma to a better way of relief and balance, and to raise his/her life into as high a state as possible. This is almost the most desirable purpose of being born as a human being in this life. For Buddhist believers, such an attitude regarding human life is viewed as the cornerstone for establishing the meaning of human life and for providing assistance in defining a life of happiness.

The challenge implied here is that so many modern people are able to live a high-tech life, and enjoy all benefits due to a highly developed materialistic satisfaction, but more and more people either drift in routine daily life without thinking about anything beyond routine trivia, or do not really feel comfortable about others and themselves. When exposing the deepest core of human life, you will find that humans are unhappy even though all kinds of knowledge and materialistic convenience are at their disposal. Many do not reflect on the real meaning attached to or included in life. Even more misinterpret this real meaning. The recognition they hold of the world is superficial and therefore not right. They have no understanding of the reality of everything that they should have. Their rather negative habit in thinking and recognizing leads to a result of misunderstanding and ignorance. Such illusory knowledge (if it is in fact knowledge), that is ignorance, again leads to forming negative habits of behavior. Many root and secondary afflictions as mentioned by the Buddhist philosophers are just samples of this kind of habit. Greed, anger, pride, ignorance, doubt, and afflicted view are root afflictions; and belligerence, resentment, spite, concealment, deceit, dissimulation, haughtiness, harmfulness, jealousy, miserliness, non-shame, non-embarrassment, non-faith, laziness, non-conscientiousness, lethargy, excitement, forgetfulness, non-introspection, and distraction are secondary afflictions, according to the Buddhist Yogacara scriptures.¹¹ I do not attempt to devalue or depreciate anything, but return to the reality of technology and the material aspect that life should own, no more and no less. The first principle of viewing things and understanding them is to do so as they are. That is a real grasp of the reality of things.

Next I will shift to the topic of human "love." In analyzing the concept of love, some factors will be found:

1. Love between parents and children;
2. Love between men and women;
3. Love between men, and between women;
4. Love between friends;
5. Love between and among work colleagues;
6. Love among fellow people;
7. Love for the inferior;
8. Love for the superiors, including celebrities;
9. Love toward God or Buddha;
10. Love for the elders and infants;
11. Universal love;
12. Love for truth, beauty, and goodness.

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato classified love into the following categories:

1. Love for the beauty of the individual person or specific entity;
2. Love for all beautiful bodies in the case that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same;
3. Love shifting from that of physical bodies to people's souls when the importance of bodies is denigrated and the beauty of ideas and laws are realized;
4. Love that moves on to various kinds of knowledge;
5. The result is that we will see the beauty of knowledge and be looking mainly not at beauty in a single example, but rather, the lover is turned to the great sea of beauty, and gives birth to many gloriously beautiful ideas and theories in the unstinting love of wisdom;
6. Now one's love moves on from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, human systems and culture, and finally to the beauty itself, that is a love for "Idee" or the "Form" of beauty, the beautiful itself, absolute, pure, and unmixed. ¹²

After recognizing all these different kinds of love in the human world, realizing their existence as part of a changing phenomena, and understanding that all these kinds of love are natural and may exist with many positive functions for human life, Buddhist philosophers will further explore the realm of reality, the real nature of love. If they succeed in doing this, their findings will be viewed as the truth of love, and an expectation will possibly be raised by other philosophers and religious believers to derive some basic principles, beneficial and useful for human application in their practice of love.

As told in the Psalm of the Holy Bible, real love is selfless. It is a pure love: only giving, with no intention to get something from the receiver in return. Such an offering of love is named "formless love," according to Buddhism. There are several kinds of giving in Buddhism:

- (1) An offer of money or other valuable material things to those in need.
- (2) An offer of one's organs, tissues and other parts of the physical body.
- (3) An offer of knowledge, ideas, advice, guidance, and skills, which are to be transferred to the receiver via appropriate means.
- (4) An offer of confidence, encouragement, hope and courage to others, so that the receivers may feel free from fear, frustration, and despair. ¹³

All these offerings are based on one's love for others. That is compassion. When we offer love that is polluted by our selfishness and greed, both the receiver and the giver will suffer. This love turns out to be flawed.

Nothing is permanent in this phenomenal world according to the Buddhist saying, and neither is the relationship between person and person. Yet it remains possible that some kinds of feeling towards beautiful things, including that of "pure love," will probably last forever—at least some people who have had such experiences view them and exclaim it in this way. These rather permanent images, emotional experiences, and sweet memories will very likely produce some kind of enduring effect upon the individual. The Buddhist point of view on this issue is that one should understand and

realize that the nature of life, like that of any other thing in this world, should be unavoidably in accordance with the rule of dependent origination, one of the major principles of the phenomenal world. This implies that any love relationship as between two persons, among people, or between a person and an object, will occur whenever causes and conditions are complete and will disappear when the same conditions and causes exist no more. If you are the one directly getting involved in that relationship, and you have strong motivation to keep that relationship, the only way you are likely to succeed in retaining it is to work and manage to maintain the causes and conditions necessary for keeping the relationship. If either one of the two parties tries to end the love with every effort, it will become very difficult for the other to rescue the love or marriage by his or her effort alone. This again demonstrates that one cannot succeed in accomplishing anything alone.

It is very difficult for causes and conditions to remain unchanged, since it is the natural law that everything is always in change, and everything always passes through the process of occurring, staying, decaying, and disappearing. Even the period of staying is not exactly static without change; it does change, but slowly and sometimes too slowly to perceive. Therefore, what you can do is to keep conditions as unaltered as possible, so that the relationship will be retained with minor changes, not radical, and not so damaging as to change the relationship you wish to keep. This requires the cautious management of the relationship between lovers, husband and wife, parents and their sons and daughters, teachers and pupils, and many others. If you say or do something wrong, it will create damage to that relationship. If you want to keep your family life in harmony and peace, you must guide other members by showing them an exemplary model of your own behavior. Only positive causes and conditions can derive positive outcomes. Therefore, only happily related causes and conditions can bring about happy outcomes.

In Buddhist sutras, it is said that Bodhisattvas are always more concerned about the causes and conditions, while ordinary people are concerned with the outcomes and ignore the causes and conditions. This is why ordinary people are often regretful about what they have done, while wise and compassionate people, as Bodhisattvas, always pre-cognize what causes and conditions may result in what outcomes, and therefore avoid creating any negative causes and conditions. Too many modern people have been annoyed about their marriage and family life. They see that marriage or love in this modern age is more unstable and uncertain. If they can learn from the Buddhist saying about causes and conditions, at least they will feel more comfortable when they lose what they love. If they can understand the genuine meaning of dependent origination, they will not only know the causes of assembly, joining together, and being apart, but also take every useful action in managing and sustaining the relationship they really love. If unfortunately, they finally fail, they can at least take consolation in knowing that they have done their best.

One night in June, the sky above Los Angeles was very clear. As I looked down from my residence on a hill, I was so pleasantly surprised to see hundreds of thousands of spots of light glittering beneath. It was an ocean of light. "This is Los Angeles!" I thought. It was an ocean of lamps, stars, and eyes; it kept glittering and twinkling down there. Los Angeles, a beautiful name, a place where many people have lived,

enjoyed, and left. A name, and a collection, of millions of items including sentient beings and non-sentient beings, e.g., human beings, other animals, plants, buildings, traffic movement, ideas, music, movies, creativity, dreams, pleasure, disappointment, and even dismay. The abstract concept, Los Angeles, is undoubtedly a complex construct, comprised of many elements and components. Any alteration of any part of this great county will make a change in it, radical or slow and minor. The existence of this great name and its substance is a changeable and changing being. Too radical a change will inevitably alter its appearance, personality, and tendency.

The most radical change is a cessation of its existence—its present life. But it is all too possible that a new city or county with the same or similar name will be built on the site in the future. Then it will be reborn. Human life and society have always passed through such a process of birth, sustaining, decay, and death. Each time people will encounter almost the same problems; similar issues are always there; and the same human weaknesses are always dominating their own destiny. Unless people can learn from lessons in each phase of existence and improve themselves, they will again face similar difficulties. Only by making themselves different can people make their fate different.

Notes

¹ *The Sutra of Dependent Origination*, trans. Hsuan Tsang (596-664) from Sanskrit into Chinese, in Taisho Edition of the Buddhist Tripitaka in Chinese, Vol. II, *The Division of Agama*, p. 547. Also *Samyuktagama*, book 12, sutra 298, in *ibid.*, Vol. II, *The Division of Agama*, 85.

² Bertrand Russell, "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" (1918), in Robert Charles Marsh (ed.), *Logic and Knowledge* (Capricorn Books Edition, 1971[1956]), 179; Russell, "Mathematical Logic as based on the Theory of Types," in *ibid.*, pp. 59-63, 101. Also G. E. Moore, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953), 1.

³ Cf. Indian Upanishadic concept of s'reyas (superior) and preyas (pleasant).

⁴ Epicurus (342/1-270 BCE), "Letter to Menoeceus," in *Epicurus: The Extant Remains*, trans. C. Bailey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), 91.

⁵ Both Buddhist and Christian philosophers believe that there is life after this life. A Chinese philosopher Fan Jun (范缜) in the fifth century argued that once one died, nothing would persist, physically and spiritually.

⁶ Utilitarian philosophers, mainly British social and moral reformers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, asserted that happiness was to produce the greatest pleasure and benefit for the greatest number of people. One of the most important utilitarian philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) in his book *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* of 1789 pointed out that human beings were born under the dominance of either pleasure or pain, and the principle of utility means to enhance the happiness of and eschew pain and harm to the society or people. Any conduct fulfilling this goal

then must be praised and rewarded, because it is beneficial and moral. For him, morality for people means happiness for the people. Bentham set up seven criteria for evaluating happiness: intensity, duration, certainty or uncertainty, propinquity or remoteness, fecundity, purity, and extent. Another Utilitarian philosopher, not less important but later in time, was John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Mill contended in his *Utilitarianism* (1863) that “utility” is the foundation of morality. We say a conduct is right when it increases our happiness, and it is wrong when it brings about the contrary result. He also criticized that so-called happiness depends on both the quantity and quality of our pleasure, rather than on quantity alone, as asserted by Bentham.

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998[1925]), I. 7, II. 6-9, X. 7-8.

⁸ Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1991[1968]), Books IX, 270[588a], and X.301[618 c-619 b].

⁹ *The Sutra of Dependent Origination*, trans. Master Hsuan Tsang from Sanskrit to Chinese, in Division of Agamas, *Taisho Edition of the Buddhist Tripitaka*, *ibid.*, Vol. II, 547-548. Also refer to Sutras 1, 8, and 11 in *Samyuktagama*, Book I, in *Taisho Edition of the Buddhist Tripitaka*.

¹⁰ *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, taught by Master Huei Neng, ed. Chung Pao (Yuan Dynasty of China), in *Taisho Tripitaka*, *ibid.*, Vol. 48.

¹¹ Vasubandhu, *Vijnapti-matrata-trimsika*, trans. Hsuan Tsang, in *Taisho Edition of the Buddhist Tripitaka in Chinese*, vol. 31, 60. Also Dharmapala et al., *Vijnapti-matrata-siddhi*, trans. Hsuan Tsang, in *ibid.*, vol. 31, 31-35.

¹² Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), 57- 59.

¹³ Nagarjuna, *Mahaprajnaparamitopadesa-sastra (Treatise on the Perfection of Great Wisdom)*, translated into Chinese by Kumarajiva, book I.

Ultimately, the truths contained in the Dharma are beyond all relative distinctions. They are beyond good versus bad, joy versus sadness, hot versus cold, or right versus wrong. No-mind can be thought of as a mental state that is able to lead the mind beyond all relative distinctions. It is a sort of antidote that cures our minds of their tendencies to hold onto inhibiting preconceptions. It is nearly impossible to imbibe the rich nectar of the Buddha’s teachings if we always approach them analytically, or if we are always comparing them to something else. First we must be receptive – this is no-mind. Then we can absorb the Dharma and make it part of ourselves as we discover that it always was there.

Once a student asked Ch’an Master Wei Shan (771-853), “What is the way?” The Master replied, “No-mind is the way.” The student said, “Then I am lost!” The master said, “Then go find someone who is not lost.” The student said, “But who is not lost?” The master said, “There is no one but yourself. You must find yourself!”

—*Lotus In A Stream*, by Hsing Yun, p.27