

Educational Philosophy in Humanistic Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

The Buddha himself was a great teacher. The perfect ideas and the truth of the world discovered and developed by the Buddha are invaluable and undoubtedly useful for modern people to apply in education. His teaching transcends time and space. It makes sense to organize his teaching in paradigm accessible and acceptable by modern educators, philosophers of education, and others who are interested in education.

The structure recommended in this article to organize Buddhist ideas of education is that of educational process, which begins with clarifying and defining the nature of education. From this the examination of educational aims, content and methods of education, personnel and premises and other facilities, and evaluation of educational effectiveness follows. Education itself is dynamic and changing rather than static and fixed. As implied by Buddhism, education is a concept and name created by sages to change people's behavior for the better in order to benefit human beings individually and collectively through appropriate teaching and learning process. Education is selfless. It is used to benefit people but not to get attached to. Education should be always changed and improved. So are teachers, students, parents, educators and administrators.

Bodhisattvas and great teachers share many virtues and merits. Both contribute to guide students with enthusiasm and efforts to benefit them. Bodhisattvas practice the six pāramitās to benefit sentient beings on the one hand, and improve themselves on the other hand. Teachers who practice giving, observing precepts, forbearance, diligence, meditation, and perfect wisdom can also benefit students on the one hand and improve themselves on the other hand.

The ideal state education can assist people to achieve, according to Buddhism, is Buddhahood—perfection in intellectual and emotional development, in personality, wisdom, ability and compassion. One who becomes perfect in all these aspects becomes a Buddha. The path for one to follow and practice toward this ultimate goal is the practice of Bodhisattva Way. Therefore, like teachers, students and all others who want to learn should learn based on these six most effective ways, according to the Buddha.

Buddhism is by nature human. By Humanistic Buddhism meant Buddhist principles aim at saving human beings from all kinds of suffering and assisting them to attain happiness, freedom, compassion and wisdom through the practice of most appropriate and perfect ways of daily life. Individual and collective improvement are both emphasized and valued.

The research methods shared and unshared by Buddhist and Western scholars and philosophers were also mentioned and discussed in this article. It is through the use of logical analysis, synthesis, reasoning and generalization to clarify and redefine critical ideas and terminologies in education. It is also through the practice of samatha and vipasyana and other intuitive approaches to investigate the in-depth and ultimate meaning of education in order to establish an integrated system of educational philosophy based on Buddhism, e.g. Humanistic Buddhism.

The Buddha as a Great Teacher

The Buddha was an educator, a great teacher. He remains a great teacher even today, because he is still teaching sentient beings through his teachings recorded in *sūtrānta-piṭaka*, *vinaya-piṭaka* and *abhidharma-piṭaka*. These teachings were expressed in twelve patterns of presentation. In *The Sūtra of Understanding the Profound and Secret Meaning (Saṃdhinirmocana)*, the Buddha answered Maitreya Bodhisattva's question¹:

Good gentleman, all what I have taught and conveyed to Bodhisattvas are truths, but they are expressed in human made language and concepts. What I have taught may be classified into these twelve areas: *sūtra*,² *geya*,³ *vyākaraṇa*,⁴ *gāthā*,⁵ *udāna*,⁶ *nidāna*,⁷ *avadāna*,⁸ *itivṛttaka*,⁹ *jātaka*,¹⁰ *vaipulya*,¹¹ *adbhuta-dharma*,¹² and *upadeśa*.¹³ The Bodhisattvas must listen to, receive, read and grasp these different types of the Buddha's teachings. They must learn to speak fluently, think smoothly, produce creative thoughts quickly, find a quiet place where they can stay alone for more concentration and reflection, and remain in a positive and attentive condition, then they will feel comfort and relief in their physical body and mental state. This is the way that Bodhisattvas may attain *samatha*.

The Buddha is teaching today through the Buddha Dharma—not only the texts which record his teachings, but also perfect merits, virtues and personality he so spontaneously demonstrated to all of us. The Buddha Dharma is a way of life, the truth, and may be equally viewed as teaching materials. On the other hand, his perfect personality, wisdom and talent form another teaching milieu where education is sometimes imparted in an unperceivable way.

Virtues and Merits Shared by Bodhisattvas and Teachers

In his childhood and youth, the Buddha was given by his father, a king, the best education at that time—a comprehensive curriculum through the best teachers and facilities.

Since the day he left his family he received education from several most outstanding meditation masters, and started his own training and cultivation for self-improvement. He learned quickly and practiced various methods of meditation and self-cultivation including the self-torturing type of ascetic practice. Although he learned all his teachers could teach him, he was not satisfied, because none of them was really enlightened and could not teach him the perfect truth and guide him to ultimate awakening. He strived to create the best way for cultivation. Later he discovered that only the middle path was the most valid approach. This awareness changed his direction of cultivation and made perfect enlightenment possible.

Before attaining perfect enlightenment, in his current life and innumerable previous lives, the Buddha was a Bodhisattva, who played the role of a teacher, in its broadest definition, to help and benefit all sentient beings through the practice based on six *pāramitās* (the six virtues or ways that may carry you from this shore of suffering across the river to the other shore of enlightenment): compassionate giving, observing precepts, meditation, diligence, forbearance, and wisdom.

Sravakas are diligent students who learn to free themselves spiritually and physically. Bodhisattvas are diligent students on the one hand and hard working teachers on the other hand. All good traits we expect from a good teacher can be seen in a Bodhisattva. Good teachers work hard with only one thing in mind: to teach students and help them to become better and better. When students are happy, teachers are happy too. A good teacher never ever asks anything in return from students except their progressive achievement in learning. A teacher works and does everything that is good and beneficial to students, and that is all he/she enjoys. In the process of teaching, a teacher often suffers from trying to benefit his/her students, but never gives up in fulfilling educational objectives and the love and concern for students. Very often teachers are very upset because students do not listen to them and do what teachers instruct them to do. However, they remain as their teachers and never withdraw from that permanent tenure position.

Teachers become great and perfect not only because they continue learning, but also because they continue teaching and suffering from helping students. Being like Bodhisattvas, teachers take every opportunity to learn by doing, and through this process, they also keep practicing the six *pāramitās* to improve themselves. The process to become a Buddha is a process of continuing self-correction and improvement. Teachers suffer because as Bodhisattvas, they are not perfect in wisdom, ability, and personality. They are not Buddhas yet. Imperfect people may commit errors and make decisions incorrectly. But Bodhisattvas are always in pursuit of perfection. They are worried because they fear they cannot do things well enough due to imperfection and immaturity. This kind of worry comes from an enthusiastic pursuit of perfection hoping that more efforts can be offered to benefit sentient beings and students.

The Buddha Taught in a Variety of Individualized and Effective Ways

From the day the Buddha attained enlightenment, he again began his career as a full-time teacher. But this time, he was a perfect teacher who taught in a process without flaws, fear, worries, weaknesses and failure. He never intended to build a religion. He was, like in his previous lives, basically a most enthusiastic instructor who was always more than happy to pass what he knew and enjoyed and benefited to any one who liked to learn from him. This is exactly the core and spirit of education, nothing more or nothing less. But now, he did it in a perfect way because of his attainment of utmost enlightenment.

The process of self-cultivation in Buddhism is a process of education. The ultimate purpose of this process is perfect enlightenment through which one becomes a Buddha. The ideal personality in Buddhist education is embodied in Buddhahood, an ultimate goal of perfection for all sentient beings.

Sometimes the Buddha spoke to one or few students, but most of the time, there were hundreds or thousands of students gathered before him when the Buddha gave lectures. It seems that to recruit new students was never a problem for him. Even in the last minutes before he would pass into nirvana, someone very aged came to him and became his last disciple. The Buddha never disappointed his students in their pursuit of the truth. In order to satisfy individual needs in learning, the Buddha used various expedient methods to teach. He always knew how to make teaching individualized and effective. He knew when and how to teach and what methods are

most suitable for individual students. He never failed to do so. He taught methods of being attentive to people who could not concentrate. For example, he would teach them how to gaze at sunset, lotus, water, bone, fire, and other items in mind, through the use of imagination, intuitive power and logical reasoning, combined with images gained from sense experiences. He taught them how to watch breathing and follow inhalation or/and exhalation and combine number counting with breathing. He taught the people who were greedy and attached to the world how to draw on past negative experiences of impurity, generalize and conclude that human life is of suffering. By doing this, he advised, people could be saved from their burning fire of desire. He taught how to contemplate on misery of others (and on themselves) to nurture compassion and mitigate hatred and anger. He taught how to use analytical methods to locate factors that contribute to the forming of problems, and to trace back, step-by-step, to the origin of all matters and events. This is a method that makes people smart in dealing with complicated issues and situations. The Buddha also taught students how to realize the reality of images in order to avoid attaching to selfness of beings and ego. These and many other teaching methods were created and used by the Buddha two thousand and six hundred years ago. The validity of these methods is impressive. Their great efficiency is beyond our imagination and expectation.

Perfect Enlightenment is the Ultimate Goal of Buddhist Education

The Buddha's attainment of perfect enlightenment indicates the completion of his education. Perfect enlightenment is the ultimate goal in all forms of education. If there is any, this is the ending of the process of education. But the overall pursuit in life should not stop there. Bodhisattvas, like the Buddha before his enlightenment, never stop learning and serving other sentient beings in appropriate ways. After being liberated from all kinds of bondage and developing wisdom and personality to perfection, the Bodhisattva now becomes a Buddha. The difference between Bodhisattva and Buddha is that the Buddha has no more flaws in perceiving, understanding, judgment, choice, and the action that follows. Due to the highest, unsurpassed development in emotion, intelligence, vision and personality, the Buddha has no worries, pains, burden, and any other kinds of suffering. He/she is pure and clean in all aspects of his life. The Buddha's life is fully in accord with the truth, the beauty and the goodness. For the Buddha, there is nothing to do with joyfulness or joylessness, or profit or nonprofit. The Buddha's mind and emotion are always pure and tranquil, on the one hand, and dynamic and powerful, on the other hand. No other powers in this world are comparable.

Educational Ideas in Buddhism may be Expressed in an Unfolding, Progressive and Creative Educational Process

In addition to articulating the relation between educational philosophy and Buddhism, one of the purposes of writing this article is to propose a model for organizing Buddhist thinking and ideas of education in a structure based on the prevalent Western conception of philosophy of education in modern time.

What is the conception of educational philosophy prevalent in modern Western academic study, especially in American and British colleges? By reviewing most of collegiate textbooks in print in the field of philosophy of education in English speaking countries, it appears that the most popular approach for constructing educational ideas and thinking is that founded on the concept of educational process.

By educational process is meant that education is always in a dynamic instead of static condition. The process of education, with its active and progressive personality, develops from setting up educational objectives, defining educational contents and methods, assigning qualified personnel for doing jobs, preparing appropriate premises for fulfilling tasks, and building and adjusting the best ways for evaluating educational effects. And also on the way, the process must be always ready for educators to return to any previous period when it is necessary for doing diagnosis and remedy.

But this is merely a typical and reduced process in a teaching situation. The actual process as experienced by students, parents, and educators is often much more complicated. Many varied factors play a role in this process. Therefore, both macro and micro visions must be included in its study. That is why more anthropological and sociological approaches are recently introduced into this area in addition to psychological and philosophical ones.

Some ingredients and events in educational process can be easily and explicitly detected and addressed, but many are not. Education is a science. But most of the time, it is also an art, a philosophy, and a way of life. It is human beings who receive education and manage education. But human beings are changeable, because there is always plasticity, instability, or flexibility in their emotion, thinking, other mental, and physical states. Human beings are beings with some distinctions more valuable than animal instincts. They have ideals in spiritual and cultural pursuit. They live in a society where individual and groups of people's behaviors form a sophisticated network. Children learn not only from schools, but also from parents, peers, television and relevant communities. Although people are usually born into a specific family, culture, and language, they grow up in more complicated circumstances. Different resources provide divergent messages for our children. There are so many kinds of "teachers" and "schools" around that our children are always exposed to divergent "education." The fact is that there is no easy and simple formula for education. But all these are not in conflict with the characteristics of education as a process of unfolding and progression of individual growth, creativity, and development.

By establishing the educational philosophy of Humanistic Buddhism on the "process" model, it will be more acceptable by Western scholars and philosophers of education. This will contribute to the acceleration of "localization" and "westernization" of Buddhism in Western world. Besides, education is actually a dynamic and progressive process. The changing personality of education can be more easily described and understood in a process paradigm.

Hundreds of thousand approaches and structures, or "Dharma gates," may be adopted in order to streamline and tailor Buddhist philosophy of education into the shape that can be understandable and acceptable by various groups of people. The spirit of teaching the truth in the most expedient and effective way signifies that educators should work as wisely and flexibly as Bodhisattvas do. The use of expedient and effective methods also implies that it will not destroy, harm, or impair the truth, and the essence of education.

The Nature of Education in regard to Humanistic Buddhism

As Master Hsing Yun says, Buddhism in its nature is humanistic, and humanistic Buddhism is Buddhism. Tom Graham in his interpretation asserted that “humanistic” should not be capitalized.¹⁴ In one of his speech to monastics of Fo Guang Shan, Master Hsing Yun said:

The humanistic Buddhism that we teach is not Hsing Yun’s Buddhism, but the Buddhism of the Buddha himself. If you do not accept humanistic Buddhism, then what kind of Buddhism do you accept? The Buddha was born in the human realm, practiced in the human realm, became enlightened in the human realm, and taught in the human realm. Isn’t that humanistic Buddhism?¹⁵

When we talk about education, there is nothing to do with other realms of sentient beings than human beings in this world. Humanistic Buddhism does not limit its “salvation” to the realm of human beings. However, it primarily focuses on educating human beings. This teaching is made to guide human beings to relieve themselves from all negative actions, thinking, habits, personality, disposition and destiny. This should be the purpose of human education in general as it is established either by churches, guilds, parents, temples, educators or governments.

When we develop a philosophy of education based on humanistic Buddhism, the connotation of “humanistic” should not imply that there are only “secular” or “this-worldly” elements in its educational system and philosophy. To be humanistic is not equivalent to be “secularized.” According to Buddhism, all worldly beings and phenomena are in change. However, the truth and the reality of changing beings reside in a changeless and unconditioned sphere which is not separated from the phenomenal world. There is only one world. The phenomena of this world are changing, while the reality resulting from knowing the truth of its changing phenomena is changeless. Buddhist philosophy of education must not limit itself to the so-called “changing” or “secular” aspect without involving in the area beyond here and now, because these two worlds are one.

The Buddha taught about the reality of all existent beings in order to help people know the truth of changing phenomena. Phenomena arise because of dependent origination. Fully understanding this reality makes people free from attaching to the illusionary visions of our world. The Buddha also taught about the selfless nature of beings with the similar compassionate effort. The unchanging world of the true reality results from correct vision and understanding of the changing phenomena of the world. Students should be taught and learn the truth, therefore, we must teach them a complete knowledge that encompasses this world and transcendental. This does not imply that there are two kinds of knowledge—one belonging to this world and defined as secular, and the other belonging to the transcendental world and defined as sacred. There is only one world, and there is only one education, the perfect and complete one. There is only one vehicle for “salvation,” the ultimate and complete enlightenment. The only difference between them is that one is attached to this world, and the other one transcends this world. Students learn to partially know the world, and they are partially ignorant. Then they progress and approach perfection, and their ignorance decreases, and also becomes more transcendental. To be transcendental means to be liberated.

If for expedient reason we would try to divide education into the secular and sacred, I would say that the sacred should function to assist people to be more aware of the nature of this secular world.

Educational Aims of Humanistic Buddhism

For Buddhist philosophers, education is a concept and a name, established by sages as an expedient means to teach, guide and help people to achieve some desirable aims. Education itself is not unchanging. It is not fixed either. The concept of education is man-made. It therefore can be defined and redefined whenever people think it is necessary. But the principle of education should be always the same. This highest principle in defining education is very simple: *can this education change people's behavior for the better and thus really benefit people individually and collectively through appropriate teaching and learning process?* I think this is exactly the purpose of establishing education for human beings. If any education cannot fulfill this purpose as originally conceived by the sages who made it, it is not worth the name education.

This question leads us to another reflection and contemplation on educational process: what are educational aims? What kinds of aims are most appropriate and desirable for human beings?

Educational aims of Humanistic Buddhism are in accord with this principle: *changing people's behavior for the better and thus really benefit human beings.* But first of all, we need to know what kinds of things will indeed benefit human beings. The second, how can we change human beings' behaviors and benefit people in a most effective and economic way with the least negative results generated from educational practice?

These questions necessitate us to return to the original attempt when the Buddha attained enlightenment and determined with great compassion to initiate self-benefit as well as other-oriented benefit improvement among sentient beings. The Buddha taught one vehicle through different tracks in order to fit individual differentiation. That is, there is only one goal for human beings and other sentient beings—the perfect truth and path for our lives. The ultimate educational goal should be based on the ultimate truth and wisdom for all. However, teaching content and methods vary. We need to explore the original attempt of the Buddha to know the basis for education.

Methodology for Philosophizing Education in Humanistic Buddhism

The importance of clarifying the nature of education lies in the fact that other steps of process cannot be well determined until the nature of education is appropriately defined. To define the nature of education is indispensable for people to see what a real education is. Without this awareness, no one can decide whether anything he/she is going to do is really educational and worth the effort. There is something that looks like education but actually is not. There is something that is only partially educational or scarcely educational. Unless we really know what the real characteristics of education are, we cannot be sure if we should go ahead with our educational plan.

Sometimes, false education appears as real, because “false educators” disguise it. These people build up their own philosophical system of education and defend

themselves well, although what they propose and do cannot really provide education good and valid and beneficial for human progress and development, either individually or collectively. Now we see it is always important to reflect on why and how we keep going with the current educational system and its operation. Is our education really teaching us the truth and the ways of happiness? Is our education really lifting us to a higher spiritual level and fostering harmony and peace of the world? Is our education really freeing us from ignorance, greed, and violence? If we can definitely say yes to all these questions, we can be positively sure that we are practicing education in the direction that is most desirable to all or most of people.

Now the question: Do we do right in our reflection? Philosophers of education contemplate in several ways. One is logical reasoning that includes inductive and deductive approaches. This is also popular among Buddhist philosophers, though the procedure and system used are different from the ones practiced by Western philosophers. The other one is logical analysis. This method was popular among ancient Greek philosophers and Plato was the best one. It became even more active in the twentieth century among analytic philosophers in England and America. The third one is intuitive approach. Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl and existentialists used this "irrational" method through different skills and procedures, but they share the similar philosophical method that is nothing to do with logic.

In Buddhism, philosophers use all these three approaches for philosophizing. They use In-ming (*hetu-vidyā*), analysis and synthesis, and induction and deduction based on logic. They practice meditation (*samatha* and *vipaśyanā*) to explore inner vision and inspiration. They also use direct witness, witness on self-witness, and witness on the witness on self-witness based on a limitlessly unfolding self-reflection process. This last one is the philosophical process through which one can investigate deeper and deeper into his/her inner thinking. The objects of this investigation include one's consciousness and all images brought about from perceived experiences in daily life. Edmund Husserl used a similar process to reduce and clarify his thinking under the name of intuitive investigation. In Buddhism, *samatha* paves the way and prepares environment for this purified and clarified investigation—*vipasyana*. This is the method taught by the Buddha that people can use to reach the core of any existential entity, including "education," to look at its very nature, and draw conclusions from this investigation.

Such a method depends on the extent the purity and accuracy of our perception and reflection proceed towards the ultimate reality of perceived objects to determine how perfect our understanding of the truth will be. This is also the extent to decide how much we know about the nature of education. It is like the story in which some blind people express differently due to different parts of an elephant each of them touched, and thus understood.

Our external experience also decides our understanding. Distorted experience brings us distorted understanding. If our understanding is deviated from the truth, our erroneous images and ignorance will remain. If we cannot know the real truth, it is inevitable that we can only obtain superficial, incomplete and distorted information. If we cannot grasp the real truth of education, we will not be able to grasp the nature of education. We then cannot be sure that we are doing our jobs correctly and appropriately.

Therefore, students of education must train their six senses: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind consciousness, as sharp, accurate and precise as possible. These six senses are the most powerful and useful instruments that people can use in perceiving, knowing, sensing, feeling and understanding. We learn from Buddhism that these first six senses work with the seventh and the eighth consciousnesses in an interactive way. The mental elements such as arrogance and selfishness come from the seventh consciousness as this *manas* is polluted and attached to the eighth consciousness, *alaya*, and views *alaya* as ego and fixed entity of the self. The negative disposition and characteristics such as arrogance, conceit and selfishness also come from the seeds previously stored in *alaya* along with positive ones.

Due to complicated interaction of causes and conditions, either from inner or outer environment, or both, and due to more conditions arising in the process of interaction, varied images occur in one's thinking and investigation. These images, we will find if we explore deeper, are only reflections of our vision of the world and its communication with us. The images are just those appearing in the mirror of our mind. The entire world of phenomena is there.

When we look at education in this process, we take education as the object to look at, study and explore. We collect a lot of information about education from schools, families, communities, and other people. We also experience education by ourselves. We even go to colleges to study the science of education or the philosophy of education. But that is not all. Without using the right method to "study" education, no one can be certain that he/she really understands education, its nature, aims, functions, and many other relevant aspects. This will be the case even for those who have worked all their life as teachers and educational administrators.

Now the question is what does it mean by saying "changing people's behavior for the better and thus really benefit human beings?" Philosophers of education very often address divergent and distinctive ideas in this regard. For example, Plato says that education should pull out and realize what people already have when they are born. But John Locke says that when human beings are born, they carry with them nothing but an empty mind like a blank paper. Therefore, Locke asserts, there are no so-called innate ideas or reasons. All ideas come from learned experiences in later days after birth. For Plato, any attempt to change human behaviors results from misunderstanding and appears nonsensical. He says, we cannot change human beings, but we must help people to revert to their innate nature. This is the only way that we can do in education to make human beings as good as they should be and really benefit them. But for Locke, educators should teach students as much as possible, arrange various suitable circumstances for students to perceive outside world as well as themselves, to accumulate knowledge and living experiences. Locke believes that this is the best way that we can adopt to change human behaviors and benefit human beings in general and individually.

Conclusion

In summary, Buddhism is concerned with all sentient beings, but is more concerned with human beings. The Buddha worked as a great teacher in order to benefit all sentient beings, particularly human beings. Pure land can be built during this life on this earth for those whose minds are purified due to correct practice and self-cultivation leading to perfect enlightenment, wisdom and freedom. The process of

self-cultivation is basically an educational process. The Buddha's efforts can be mainly viewed as being in the area of education in its broader meaning.

The gift we inherit from the Buddha is invaluable treasure that consists of wonderful discovery of the ultimate truth of the world, his creative and in-depth thinking, his perfect personality, ability and wisdom, as well as his great deeds. His teaching can be effectively applicable and beneficial to modern people. From the Buddha's teaching, modern people can establish a new vision and way of life, and a new education as well. The purpose of this education will make every one a whole person—perfect both mentally and physically. This person will possess perfect worldly and transcendental wisdom, and his/her personality and emotion will be also fully and perfectly realized. Besides, a human society of harmony, peace, mutual respect, dignity, and positive development thus will be very positively ensured.

Notes

¹ *Samdhinirmocana*, chapter 6, translated by Naichen Chen from the Chinese translation by Master Xuan Zang.

² *Sūtra* is the Buddha's teachings in prose style. The word was originally used to indicate all the Buddha's texts that were recorded and gathered together by his disciples in the first or two councils after the Buddha passed into nirvana.

³ *Geya* is partial repeat of sutra in verses.

⁴ *Vyākaraṇa* is the Buddha's verification of his prediction regarding his disciples' future achievement.

⁵ *Gāthā* is the Buddha's teachings all written in verses style.

⁶ *Udāna* is the teachings initiated by the Buddha himself, but not given upon his disciple's request.

⁷ *Nidāna* is the origin and introductory background of Buddha's teaching.

⁸ *Avadāna* is similes and the glorious stories of ancient sages the Buddha used in his teachings.

⁹ *Itivṛttaka* is the style of writing to state what the Buddha and his disciples did in the far past but do not clearly and definitely indicate the times and places the events happened.

¹⁰ *Jataka* consists of stories of the Buddha's compassionate conduct in previous lives.

¹¹ *Vaipulya* is the teaching of correct knowledge and in-depth truth.

¹² *Adbhuta-dharma* is the Buddha and his disciples' mystic and unusual conduct.

¹³ *Upadeśa* is the Buddha's discourse on laws, realities, and meaning of life and world.

¹⁴ Master Hsing Yun, *What is Humanistic Buddhism? A Talk Given to the Monastic Community at Fo Guang Shan*, August 25, 2000. Translated by Tom Graham. Unpublished.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*