

Embracing Differences and Sharing Commonalities

Harmony According to the Middle Way: The Humanistic Buddhism Perspective

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Introduction

On the subject of fraternity, a Buddhist synonym is “harmony.” On the basis of harmony within our own mind, we can contribute to fraternity or relational harmony: harmony between self and other, harmony within the family, harmony in society, and harmony or peace in the world. According to Humanistic Buddhism, these five dimensions are considered the “five harmonies” for us to practice and actualize in our daily lives.

We begin with the first harmony within our own mind. We practice by cultivating harmony or peace within ourselves so that

we can eventually be free of the suffering originating in fear, anger, and selfishness. Then we are prepared to spread harmony from self to another person, progressing to our family, our community, our society, and the rest of the world. Based on this first harmony, the goal of Humanistic Buddhism is to actualize the other four harmonies. I would like to share with you some words about this fourfold spreading by my teacher, Venerable Master Hsing Yün, the founder of the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order in Taiwan and a major propagator of Humanistic Buddhism. He has written and spoken during most of his life about ways to attain fraternity or universal harmony. My master has been advocating the following four perspectives on relational and social harmony.

1. Buddhism Seeks Harmony between Self and Others, Not Confrontation

Whenever there is confrontation, there will be conflict. We must work on developing harmony among people. Peaceful fraternal relations are very important within the different communities, ethnicities, racial groups, and religions of a society.

At Fo Guang Shan in Taiwan, we conduct regular interfaith events. Cardinal Paul Shan was a great friend of Master Hsing Yün, and after the cardinal passed away some years ago, an interfaith memorial service was held at Fo Guang Shan in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. Many of the attendees from around Taiwan visited Fo Guang Shan for the first time, coming together to offer their respects to a religious icon who had served the community for many decades.

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2. Buddhism Seeks to Embrace Differences, Not Impose a Sameness that Everyone Must Adopt

In this world, there are many different objects, ideas, traditions, groups, and institutions. It is only natural that there would be a multitude of religions in the world. Just as we all have different family names and backgrounds, we of different religions can still be friends who mutually support and kindly interact with each other in the spirit of fraternity. Difference is necessary. Like the clothes we wear, their different colors, styles, and designs bring a kind of beauty to life. We certainly live in a colorful world! Not being the same is truly very good, very beautiful. We appreciate flowers and plants because of their different colors, sizes, and shapes. That should also go for people and all matters in the world.

3. Buddhism Recognizes the Middle Way, Dependent Origination, and Mutual Respect for Each Other

The Middle Way means being unbiased or impartial and not being polarized. It is difficult for most, if not all, people to accept extremism on any matter. When we following the Middle Way, we need to be courteous, responsible, and hard working. Living the Middle Way, we should not be cold and indifferent or overly passionate. We should not be wasteful, even if we have a lot of money; nor should we be tight-fisted if we have too little money.

In understanding dependent origination, we can appreciate that a country or a family should not be divided or for any reason. Just like the five fingers of our hand, they have to join together and work in collaboration in order to be strong and useful. An example of dependent origination manifesting in daily life is the common occurrence of people fighting over their family fortune. Should a

family with four siblings cut the dining table into four parts in the name of equality? No. It is crucial that they all act in accord with their fraternal relations as brothers and sisters and with respect and love, supporting and accepting each other. Then they can experience harmony in the family, especially after their loved one has died. In the larger context of society, we should not exclude another person, or another community of persons, since they too or our brothers and sisters. Would such exclusion be good for our communities and society?

We cannot exist alone in this world. We need the support of people from various fields, trades, and professions. We need farmers to grow our food and manufacturers to provide us with clothes and amenities like computers. Without others, how are we going to survive? It is important to appreciate the significance of dependent origination and the Middle Way. Hence, it is critical for us to make positive fraternal connections based on broad affinities with others.

4. Buddhism Seeks Peaceful Coexistence, Not War and Killing

Life is not just for our own individual existence. Everyone is interdependent. Therefore, Buddhists do not advocate war and killing. War only kills, injures, and displaces people as well as other living beings, destroying beautiful places that people consider home. Many people in the world have endured long periods of war. As a result, they have had to escape from destruction and killing with no safe place to go. They live in endless suffering due to fear, hunger, and diseases. The children have had to endure life without necessary schooling and the elderly without proper health care. To attain social fraternity or harmony and peace in the world, Buddhism wishes for the end of all wars.

Conclusion

In understanding the philosophy of the Middle Way, we need to appreciate that this world is “half and half”: good and bad, male and female, day and night. While the Buddha’s world is half, the devil’s world is also half! We should work to spread benevolence in order to overcome malevolence. In spreading Humanistic Buddhism around the world, Venerable Master Hsing Yün holds no specific regional perspective. Instead, he advocates that we should all consider ourselves as “global citizens.” When he first arrived in Taiwan, he was called a “Chinese monk.” Upon returning to visit his home village in China many years later, the locals called him a “Taiwanese monk.” So he believes that in living on planet Earth, every person is a member of one family—we are all brothers and sisters. As Pope Francis and Venerable Master Hsuing Yün say, this perspective must be the basis for world peace and mutual co-existence, now and into the future. And in the words of the Buddha: “In this world, hate never dispelled hate. Only love dispels hate.” It is only by cultivating love and kindness for ourselves and others that we can build peace and fraternity on earth.

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