Is Mahāyāna Buddhism a Humanism? Some Remarks on Buddhism in China

HELWIG SCHMIDT-GLINTZER

Preliminary Remarks

As Bernard Faure recently stated, many ideas about Buddhism "stem from a refusal to take the diversity of Buddhism as a living tradition seriously".[1] Furthermore the success of Buddhism was a result of its willingness to adapt to specific social circumstances. Thus, Buddhism in China had, and still has, many facets and faces. It stemmed first from the totality of the so-called Hīnayāna. After other texts which came from India and Central Asia along the Silk Road and had been translated into Chinese, the Mahāyāna version of Buddhism became the dominant version. Although under constant threat by the Chinese state the Buddhist doctrine permeated Chinese society on all levels, thus intensifying the culture of compassion in China. In the following reflections I will trace aspects of humanism in China which are connected with the Buddhist traditions. From its first contact with Chinese indigenous religions and philosophical traditions Buddhism became amalgamated with Confucian humanism in which natural law and respect towards every human being were not unknown.

1 Faure 2009, p. 7.

Universalistic Approach of Mahāyāna

Buddhism is seen as a universal doctrine which from its beginnings was directed at every human being. It is not exclusive, but open to everyone, laymen and clerics alike. However, its social reality was different and in the early history of the Buddhist teaching the way of the *dharma* was restricted to clergymen only. This changed fundamentally when Buddhism reached the Gandhara region in the late 4th century BCE, from where it later expanded into China and East Asia. In Gandhara the teaching of the Buddha was confronted with Hellenistic thought and particularly with the concept of individuality as it was developed in Ancient Greece. The renaissance of the original teaching of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni in the valleys of Indus and Swat during the last two centuries BCE found expression in public lectures and at the same time it was written down on palm leaves and other material. As a result Buddhist teaching found its way to many different places in Eurasia. One of the most popular Buddhist Mahāyāna texts is the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa sūtra* (Chin. *Weimojie jing*) which became very prominent all over Central and East Asia and China from the 5th century CE as can be seen in mural paintings as well as in treatises and commentaries on Buddhism by authors in medieval China.

The central figure is the layman Vimalakīrti who had perfected himself in every virtue and thus obtained the status of a *bodhisattva*, but for the sake of "expedience" (Skr. *upāya*) he had assumed the role of a householder:

> Although a white-clad layman, he kept the rule of the śramaṅas […] He did not stay in the formless realm [P. *arūpa-dhātu*], but possessed wife and concubines. Following what he himself enjoyed, he continually cultivated pure conduct. Although possessing family and retinue, he lived continually as if in a hermitage. Manifestly adorning his person, well clothed and fed, within himself he was continually as if in trance [Skr. *dhyāna*]. If present among gamblers or revelers, he used the occasion to save men. He accepted heretics, leading them by the Buddha's teaching. Not forsaking the sacred scriptures, he utilized the good words of worldly and profane teachings, enjoying them through *dharma*-enjoyment.[2]

2 T. 4754: 14.521a. Translation by Mather 1968, p. 63.

Thus Vimalakīrti transcended all social barriers such as caste and other differentiations. In the text itself there are several instances where the similarity of *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* is exemplified. At the heart of this is the doctrine that everything including the *dharmas* is without substance. The *Vimalakīrti sūtra* contains a dispute between Śāriputra, a disciple of Buddha Śākyamuni, and a heavenly *apsara* during which — to Śāriputra's astonishment — this *apsara* turns his body into a woman's body using her supernatural power. The *apsara* declares:

> Good sir, if you can change into this woman's likeness, then all women's bodies are likewise changeable. If you, not being a woman, have nevertheless a woman's body and are invisible (as far as your original body is concerned), then all women, though possessing women's bodies, are non-women and invisible. It's just as the Buddha said: "All the *dharmas* are non-female and non-male."[3]

Richard B. Mather has underlined the fresh quality of this early polemical dispute in which the author sets out to ridicule the "cheerless asceticism of the *śrāvakas* and pulverize the dessicated scholasticism of their Abhidharma," thus enabling Vimalakīrti to endear himself to the Chinese intellectuals of the third and fourth centuries.[4] The universality of the Buddhist doctrine put forward by the Mādhyamika school as an exponent of the Mahāyāna teaching appealed to the Chinese as well as to representatives of other cultures. The saying that "Buddha with a single voice declares the law, while sentient beings, each in his own way, construe the meaning"[5] means that Buddha's law is applicable to every culture and not restricted to the lifestyle of the Indians. This universalistic notion is reflected in a passage by Liu Xie contained in chapter 8 of the "Collection to Propagate and to Illuminate [Buddhism]" (Chin. *Hongming ji*):

> The "Expedient Teaching" [Chin. *quanjiao*] is not localized; it does not, because of differences between the religious and secular, violate what is proper. Its subtle influence is not exotic; how can it, because of differences between Chinese and barbarians, go against human sensibilities? Therefore, "With a single voice it declares the Law," and variant interpretations are understood simultaneously; in a single vehicle it transports the Teach-

3 Mather 1968, p. 64.
4 Ibid., p. 65.
5 Ibid., p. 66.

ing, and the different *sūtras* all reach the same conclusion. Is the mere fact of being barbarian of Chinese a barrier?[6]

Thus Mahāyāna tradition took up the tradition of Buddha's teaching of the middle path by which liberation is provided for everybody and not just for those who join the *saṅgha*.

Another aspect of Mahāyāna is embodied in the concept of the *bodhisattva*. It is not just the fact that all sentient beings are bound to the cycle of birth and death which means that every human being must consider all living beings equal. Since they are all waiting for salvation, every sentient being is able to increase its own *karmic* account by showing compassion and helping other sentient beings, all of which are all said to be able to perfect their Buddha nature.

Buddhism *versus* Human Rights

Although Buddhism at first sight seems to be compatible with claims for human rights, there are many inconsistencies between Buddhism and the human rights movement. This has been already commented on by others.[7] The fundamental difference between Buddhism and the concept of human rights is that in spite of the attitude of accommodation demonstrated in the case of Vimalakīrti, Buddhism principally renounces the world. It accepts differences and explains them as being the result of former deeds. Although in Mahāyāna the principal possibility of attaining enlightenment is well known, the teaching still accepts the theory of *karmic* retribution. Thus even attaining the state of liberation and spiritual enlightenment does not mean that one is freed from injustice, suppression or other circumstances which usually are regarded as contravening human rights. On the contrary, attaining enlightenment does not depend on being free of suppression of any kind. Thus the central conception of Buddhism in no way includes struggling against a disregard for human rights.

On the other hand, because of its strong claim for compassion Buddhism always stands on the side of the suffering creature. The rhetoric of human rights, however, is alien to Buddhism. This is due to a different attitude towards the individual in East Asia on the one hand and in the West on the other. There are even some

6 Mather 1968, pp. 66–67.

7 Chamarik 2000; Florida 2009.

scholars who argue that the human rights discourse is even deepening the gap between different cultures. Masao Abe stated:

> Strictly speaking, the exact equivalent of the phrase "human rights" in the Western sense cannot be found anywhere in Buddhist literature.[8]

David Chappell is quoted as saying:

> Scholars have argued that Buddhism has no doctrine of human rights and, technically, they are right.[9]

These statements refer to the different concept of man in Buddhism on the one hand and in the human rights discourse on the other.

In fact the human rights discourse can be regarded as a means of masking privilege. It is obvious that Western powers do not follow the principles set by human rights when their own interests are involved. This was neither the case in the Congo in the early 1960s nor in Vietnam, and it was also not applicable in the context of the invasion of the US and its supporting powers in Iraq. Thus it is more than reasonable that some of those who perceive themselves as guardians of the humanist tradition of East Asia are not willing just to subscribe blindly to the Western concept of human rights. This has much to do with the different concepts of state power in the West and in East Asia (as well as with the defense of authoritarian practices in Asian countries).

In spite of these fundamental differences, many representatives of present-day Buddhism tend to sympathize with advocates of Western human rights. When communism became the state ideology in countries such as China, which had long Buddhist traditions, tensions between state and religion came to a head. But even before that, as in Japan, in processes of modernization conflicts between institutionalized Buddhism and the claims of the representatives of the modern state led to conflicts and very often to suppression of Buddhist institutions and adherents of their religion, especially the monks and nuns. Mainly as a result of such experiences the idea arose that there could be a natural alliance of Buddhism and the claims of human rights.[10] In this context one might even argue that

8 Florida 2005, p. 10.
9 Ibid., p. 9.
10 Florida 2005, p. 12.

throughout its history Buddhism has been adapting itself to changing situations and circumstances. Seen from this perspective, one might even claim that in a process of assimilation Buddhism has developed into a strong advocate of human rights.

Aspects of Incompatibility

In spite of evidence of processes of assimilation one cannot neglect the fundamental differences between Buddhist doctrine and Western human rights discourse. From the beginning it was the central conception and the main aim of Buddhism to foster awareness of the interplay of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. Buddhist cosmology and its neglect of human concerns is incompatible with our understanding of human rights. Therefore any attempt to identify a central conception of Buddhism, on the one hand, and an attempt to prove that it is in harmony with the conception of human rights is doomed to failure. All that is possible is a reconstruction of the Mahāyāna traditions in order to trace elements of humanistic attitudes. We should not only pay attention to the written sources but also take the actual practice of Buddhism into consideration, especially Buddhist ritual, the *vinaya* and meditation practice.

Are there human rights in the world of *saṃsāra*? Is being reborn in the Pure Land a kind of realization of humanist ideals? What role do meritorious deeds play? And what about the relationship between the *karmic* situation and the quest for respect? It seems that from the start the issue of human rights does not concern the Buddhist because empathy and compassion are things one does not practice in order to respect other living beings' rights — they themselves are not entitled to ask for compassion — but rather to obey the precept not to harm other living beings. The status of each individual depends not on rights or restrictions but on his *karma*. In general Mahāyāna thinking is relativistic and thus stands in contrast to the universal claims of the *Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948.[11] Despite Buddhism's concerns for self-perfection and its lack of a social utopian vision, in practice Buddhists have shown themselves committed to an idea of social justice and even the use of force.

11 Florida 2005, p. 16.

Subjectivity

Buddha formulates his doctrine as a result of his internal insights and experiences both from his own and former lives. Thus, outside him there can be no other independent instance to which to appeal. This is another reason why it seems impossible to ground a declaration of human rights on Buddha's teaching. One must admit, however, that statutes and laws are necessary in order to prevent conflicting interests resulting in manslaughter and murder.[12] But seen from a Buddhist worldview it is questionable to demand compliance with human rights as long as the motivation for this is mingled with any interest. There is, however, the option for hoping that by spiritual practice, compassionate behavior, and cooperation human rights might be factually realized.[13] The pursuit of happiness in a material world as defined by the *American Declaration of Independence* is, however, not of interest to the Buddhist; instead he follows his *dharma*.

The Four Noble Truths

After realizing that there is a truth of suffering on the one hand and a truth of the origin of this suffering on the other, i.e. that all suffering has its causes, there is the third truth which describes not the path to the elimination of suffering but the goal itself, i.e. the state of utter absence of suffering known as *nirvāṇa*. In this state there can be no concept of self. The fourth truth describes the path to *nirvāṇa*. Whereas the starting point for the human rights discourse is that man should be prevented from suffering, in Buddhism it is fundamental to accept that life in itself is suffering. Only with regard to the notion of equality does Mahāyāna Buddhism ("all living beings have an innate Buddha nature") come near to the human rights position, namely in claiming that all men are equal in that they have the potential to attain enlightenment.[14] But whereas the human rights discourse argues in favor of the acknowledgement of particular rights, Buddhism does not seek justice but liberation. There is, as has been said, no identifiable instance in Buddhism which could guarantee rights. Only in later developments and in amalgamation with Chinese religious and bureaucratic traditions do we

12 Florida 2005, p. 18.
13 Ibid., p. 19.
14 Ibid., p. 19.

encounter the emergence of a Buddhist hell with the function of a purgatory and a judicial court to deliberate upon human fate.[15]

Vimalakīrti, *Bodhisattva* Ideal and Hybris

As far as humanist attitudes in Mahāyāna Buddhism are concerned the ideal of the *bodhisattva* is repeatedly brought into play. The concept evolved out of a critique of the idea of the *arhat* in the school of the Mahāsāṃghikas, and describes one who seeks to attain the state of Buddha while at the same time practicing compassion. This became the fundamental concept of the way of the *bodhisattva*. Out of empathy and compassion the liberation of the individual is thus regarded as being tantamount to the liberation of all living beings. Thus a *bodhisattva* was one who postponed his own redemption, the entrance into *nirvāṇa*, in order to save others or to lead them to salvation. It was presupposed that one's own *karma* could be transferred to others. Thus hope was engendered that salvation could be reached through deeds by others, thus leaving the wheel of reincarnation.

The *bodhisattva* protects all living beings, subduing all evil and practising the six "perfections" (Skr. *pāramitā*) which are the cardinal virtues:

(1) "generosity" (*dāna-pāramitā*),
(2) "morality" (*śīla-pāramitā*),
(3) "leniency and forbearance" (*kśānti-pāramitā*),
(4) "vigor" (*vīrya-pāramitā*),
(5) "contemplation" (*dhyāna-pāramitā*), and
(6) "wisdom" (*prajñā-pāramitā*).

In some lists the following four are added:

(7) "skilfulness in transmitting the teaching" (*upāya-kauśalya-pāramitā*),
(8) "decisiveness" (*pranidhāna-pāramitā*),
(9) "magic power" (*bala-pāramitā*),
(10) "knowledge" (*jñāna-pāramitā*).

Correspondingly, these perfections are realized in ten stages or layers or realms (Skr) *bhūmi*):

15 Teiser 1994; Keown *et al*. 1998.

(1) joy,
(2) purity,
(3) radiation,
(4) blazing Wisdom,
(5) unmatched,
(6) alertness,
(7) unexhausted skill,
(8) quietude,
(9) perfect understanding,
(10) cloud of the *dharma*.

Whereas in the first six stages a *bodhisattva* remains bound to concepts and reality, from the seventh stage onwards he no longer concerns himself with the material world. After he has finally reached the tenth stage he is consecrated with encompassing wisdom by Buddha himself. Equipped with unlimited miraculous power, he is graceful towards all living beings and helps them to salvation. By this process, in the Mahāyāna the Buddha Śākyamuni is accompanied by a number of similar divine beings, such as e.g. Amitābha, Maitreya and Avalokiteśvara, the *bodhisattva* of mercy, who in China transmutes into the female Guanyin (Jp. Kannon) as well as Mañjuśrī, the amicable and majestic *bodhisattva* of wisdom. According to Étienne Lamotte these are just manifestations of the wisdom and the mercy of Buddha. Thus these Buddhas are all identical in their "body of reality" (Skr. *dharmakāya*) which is the teaching itself. According to Mahāyāna teaching one finds numberless Buddhas and *bodhisattva*s filling an increasing infinity of worlds.

The most prominent among the *bodhisattva*s in East Asia is Amitābha or Amitāyus ("immense light" or "immense lifespan"). He is the lord of the "Western Paradise," the "Pure Land" (Skr. Sukhāvatī), who saves all who pray for help and mercy. These Mahāyāna teachings are contained in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature as well as in the *Diamond Sūtra*, the *Heart Sūtra* and the *Lotus Sūtra* (Skr. *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*).

The concept of the *bodhisattva* is illustrated in the parable of the burning house in the *Lotus Sūtra* (chapter 3), where Buddha instructs his follower Śāriputra on the power of "expedient means" (Skr. *upāya*):

I tell you, Śāriputra,
you and the others
are all my children,
and I am a father to you.
For repeated *kalpas*
you have burned in the flames of manifold sufferings,
but I will save you all
and cause you to escape from the threefold world.
Although earlier I told you
that you had attained extinction,
that was only the end of birth and death,
it was not true extinction.
Now what is needed
is simply that you acquire Buddha wisdom.
If there are *bodhisattva*s
here in my assembly,
let them with a single mind
listen to the true Law of the Buddhas.[16]

Small and Great Wisdom

There are, however, different kinds of people, those with great wisdom and others who are not yet able to emancipate themselves from falsehood and delusion. But the Buddha as the *Dharma*-King will "bring peace and safety to living beings".[17] At first sight modern promises such as Kang Youwei's "great community" (Chin. *datong*) or the program issued by Hu Jintao propagating a "harmonious society" (Chin. *hexie shehui*) are reminiscent of these Buddhist ideals. Even the *Declaration of Independence* issued on July 4, 1776, may function in the same way.

To come to a conclusion, humanism and human rights do not contradict the central teachings of Mahāyāna, but they have different intellectual and spiritual conditions. The ideas of humanism and human rights may function as "expedient means" (*upāya*) which help people find the path to salvation. On the other hand the Mahāyāna doctrine does not speak of "equally born" and thus from the perspective of Western theories of human rights Buddhism does not conform to the standard of its concept of the indi-

16 Watson 1993, p. 71.
17 Ibid., p. 72.

vidual. In the end, however, Buddhism might prove to be a better means to promote the goals of the human rights movement than Western individualistic concepts.

After a long history of folk Buddhist movements in late imperial China on the one hand and of the adaptation of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism by the Manchu emperors, China saw a Buddhist revival from which new forms of Buddhism emerged such as e.g. the Ciji group originating in Hualian in Taiwan, a Buddhist charitable organization founded in 1966 by "master" Zhengyan (born 1937), a nun hailed by some as "the Mother Teresa of Asia".[18] One of her central messages reads:

> Buddha is not a god. However, all living beings in the world have the Buddha-nature. The Buddha has transcended his human nature and become a saint. He is the most respected of those who are enlightened and who enlighten others. He is the guide of true human life. […] The truly inspiring Buddha can only be found in our hearts.[19]

She teaches the ability to reach perfection of everyone:

> All of us can strive for enlightenment. Once enlightened, you and I can be just like Sakyamuni, Kwan-yin, and Ti-tsang.[20]

Thus Buddhism has the potential to support humanism or it might even itself be called humanism. Nevertheless at certain times it accepted, even acclaimed the suppression of counterrevolutionaries. Holmes Welch transmitted a report on a forum in Peking in which a nun remarked

> […] that the nation's resolve to shoot counterrevolutionaries was like coping with spinal meningitis or tuberculosis: unless one killed it quickly, one's own life was in the greatest danger.[21]

Therefore although we might accept Buddhism as peaceful and nonviolent, in reality, "Buddhism has a complex relationship with war" and violence in general.[22]

---

18 Zhiru 2000, p. 85.
19 Ibid., p. 92.
20 Ibid., p. 94.
21 Welch 1972, p. 287.
22 Faure 2009, p. 95.

List of Chinese Terms

Guanyin 觀音
hexie shehui 和諧社會
Hongming ji 弘明集
Hu Jintao 胡錦濤
Kang Youwei 康有為
Liu Xie 劉勰
quanjiao 權教
Weimojie jing 維摩詰經
Zhengyan 證嚴