THE MODERN SIGNIFICANCE OF SOME BASIC CONCEPTS IN CHINESE BUDDHISM

FANG Litian
Renmin University of China

In the global modernization process, does Chinese Buddhist philosophy still have any value for contemporary society? If so, what is its modern value? This is a question that researchers of Chinese Buddhist philosophy must answer. Only after we reconstruct the value of Buddhism can it achieve full vitality. What modern transformation do we need to perform in order to reestablish the modern value of Chinese Buddhist philosophy and let its modern function be actualized? This is a question that researchers of Chinese Buddhist philosophy should answer and explain.

Buddhism, which offers a way of deliverance relevant to the ultimate concerns of mankind, is an enormous system of beliefs, philosophy, and values. Buddhism has had billions of believers in its long history of more than twenty-five hundred years, including more than two thousand years in China. This shows the lasting vitality and eternal value of Buddhism. But we should also recognize that how Buddhism should reestablish its value and develop its function in the future is both a tremendous problem of theory and a serious and urgent problem of practice.

The fate of Buddhism depends on its caring for society. The modern value of Buddhism depends on its function in the human society of the twenty-first century. Since man parted ways with apes, human society has made unprecedented progress. In our time of constant progress, however, men have also developed the means to destroy the earth and nature. The progress of human society should be credited to mankind, and so should the threat that endangers the existence and development of human society. In the meantime, we should also recognize that modernization has an impact on many aspects of our material life, institutional regulations, and thoughts. Human society today faces the problems of a crisis in belief, moral decline, and loss of conscience, which collectively indicate a grievous loss of the spirit of humanity. This provides an unprecedented historical opportunity for
Buddhist philosophy, which is equipped with a conception of cosmic totality and a humane religious spirit that pursues transcendence and readjusts the relationship between men themselves and between man and nature.

In order to reevaluate and reconstruct Chinese Buddhism to enhance its modern value, we must conduct an in-depth analysis of current human society and its characteristics, and the basic trajectory of future society. We must sort through the resources of Chinese Buddhism to reveal the fundamental concepts and principles that can have real meaning for societies in the present and future. We need to combine the basic principles of Buddhism with social reality in order to offer meaningful suggestions for the steps to take to solve basic conflicts in contemporary human society.

I. Basic Characteristics and Conflicts of Twenty-First Century Human Society

Since the 1970s, the progress of Chinese modernization has achieved great results that have attracted the world’s attention. The developed coastal regions have been industrialized and have begun the progress of “intellectualization.” The development of the western regions has also unfolded energetically. The coordinated development of industrialization and intellectualization will certainly hasten the pace of China’s modernization. There are great differences in the production, circulation, and distribution of intellectual and industrial economies. These developments, especially the rise of the intellectual economy and the globalization that characterizes it, have a broad and profound impact on the relations between man and himself, men and other men, ethnicities and nations, and man and nature. Thus these developments have in turn given rise to the development of new contradictions and conflicts in human society.

Because of the great achievement of modernization, the material conditions of men’s life keep improving and their lifestyles keep renewing. In today’s world, material wealth and man’s material desires grow at the same pace. In the pursuit of external material wealth, some neglect their own internal values and spiritual life, so much so that they lose their humanity and values in a life of wealth and comfort. With the improvement of material life, the spiritual life declines. With the increase of scientific knowledge, moral cultivation becomes deprived. The contrast between the abundance of material life and the