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# Buddhist Humanism Offers a Way Out for Conventional Leaders

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**Abstract:** Buddhist humanism provides an alternative to conventional leadership models. The integration of Dharma principles into leadership epistemology offers paths of inspiration in understanding human relations. Concepts such as impermanence and non-self challenge conventional self-centred leadership models. This humanist approach acknowledges the importance of addressing mundane worldly needs while simultaneously fulfilling the spiritual aspects needed for personal happiness and for contribution to the well-being of others .

## Introduction

MOST POLITICAL leaders today—given the ubiquitous mass media coverage they have access to—tend to exhibit significant hierarchic and self-centred tendencies in their public persona, and in their decision making. What this often means is that they tend to prioritize immediate self-defence over the well-being of the public. In many cases, and definitely in Malaysia, this pattern of accepted self-centredness tends to persist long after their retirement from office and from positions of power.

The social and political consequences of this all-too-common phenomenon are wide-ranging, however, and the lack of research into and analysis of this

weakness in leadership leaves society in a cultural entrapment.

This short article investigates how a Buddhist humanistic approach may help address this prominence of short-term self-interest among decision makers, and argue for a more rounded rationality in modern decision making. Surprisingly perhaps, Buddhist approaches to self-improvement and philosophy have been gaining discursive popularity in recent decades globally, and leading figures adhering to Buddhist thought have been having a significant positive impact in their communities, and on the world.

What can be learned from this which can be generally applied?

## **Waning Moral Leadership**

Ang Choo Hong, an esteemed Buddhist thought leader in Malaysia, delineates two key components in leadership: Conventional leadership and Dharma principles (Ang 2021: 19). Leaders, he says, have to manage matters simultaneously at the “ordinary mundane level and the higher supra mundane level” (ibid.: 11). The ordinary mundane level refers to worldly needs, while the supra mundane level is concerned with managing one’s own happiness and the well-being of others.

In various communities, leadership quality has been dropping dramatically in recent years. In the case of the Malaysian Chinese community, this decline is evident in aging leadership, a decrease in activity levels, and a loss of focus in terms of function and direction. The influence of traditional Chinese associations which once played a highly significant role in representing their community during the critical stages of nation-building has waned over the years.

Presently, partly due to social transformations and their shrinking role in the community, Chinese associations get into the news more for internal fighting than anything else. Sometimes, their legal tussles continue to be reported in newspapers for years. Part of the problem is an inherent one. Successful businessmen often take on leadership roles in Chinese associations. Upon analysing their competition for positions, it becomes apparent that in many instances, these leaders are reluctant—and even unable—to relinquish their position, due to business attachments, personal pride or other forms of interests.

This dire situation in traditional Malaysian Chinese associations seems to contrast sharply today from the Buddhist associations that to an extent share the same

constituency, and which have been gaining social prominence.

Leaders in Buddhist associations are elected through qualification rather than effluence. The qualification could be either in education or spiritual attainment as recognized by their respective community. For example, current and past presidents of the Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia (YBAM) have mostly been educated professionals such as engineers, medical doctor, lawyer or academicians, who furthermore have been perceived as strong practitioners of Buddhist teachings.

What are some of these teachings which can be of relevance more generally?

## **Buddhist Humanism in Leadership**

Buddhist leaders have to consider mundane as well as intangible (or transcendent) interests at the same time, as explained by Ang (2021:11). At the mundane level, they employ their transcendent awareness to strategize for the association's growth. At the transcendent level, leadership lies in guiding the association to fulfil its mission on the one hand, and in facilitating the spiritual cultivation of both oneself and others, on the other.

Principles in Buddhist humanistic leadership, according to Ang Choo Hong, includes the three characteristics of life, the four sublime mental status, the four bases of bonding of harmony living, the ten virtues of kings, the seven noble treasures, and noble friendship (2021: 101-159).

These principles can equip leaders with more rounded perspectives on people and on life. For example, the notions of impermanence and non-self can instil leaders with a more temporal sense of being

when contributing to any association. Clinging on to positions is therefore not a goal to be valued or desired.

Non-self is potentially an alternative remedy to self-centred leadership. The notion of non-self—or emptiness—holds great implications for the choice of management style. Non-self involves a focus on the condition of inter-being and inter-connectedness, and of the causes and effects involved. Each individual or self is seen as an infinite network of causes. To achieve any of its goals, an association has to attain the support of the various actors involved, and to fulfil many necessary conditions. To quote Ang (2021:107 & 108):

“When we are successful, we know that it’s not due to our efforts alone but others have a role in it too. We also realize that for us to be successful we need to help others to be successful... If we see the interconnectedness of members within an organisation, and are less attached to the false idea of a self, we can make better decision[s].”

Another dimension that Buddhist philosophy brings to a discussion on leadership is with regards to the ultimate purpose of an organisation. The general ambition of an ordinary business entity is overly focused on maximization of profit; this remains true even when dealing with ESG compliance. Ideally, the notion of non-self opens up possibilities, even for business leaders, to look beyond profit but to incorporate social responsibility, employer welfare and care for consumers into their decision-making processes (Ang 2021: 9).

Such an outcome might be unrealistic to hope for in many cases, but where non-profit organisations are concerned, the approach can prove very effective.

A good example of this is the Buddhist Tzu Chi Merits Society Malaysia (Tzu Chi). It is a Buddhist organisation with a focus on promoting charity, medicine, education and humanistic culture, and to achieve this through community volunteerism. Tzu Chi was set up by a Taiwanese expatriate in 1993. It has grown with an extensive support of local participation to an estimated 2,000 committed volunteers in 16 branches throughout Malaysia. Since its establishment in 1993, Tzu Chi has accomplished an extraordinary amount in helping kidney patients, single old folk and other marginalised groups regardless of ethnicity and religiosity. Through persuasive leadership, it receives enormous funds from various tycoons and is able to call on volunteers for various humanitarian works. Leaders in the organization have internalized Buddhist teachings of exercising kindness and compassion through charity work.

Tzu Chi stands out today as an example of how an organisation propagating humanistic values can mainstream charity in society at large.

Many examples exist of how leaders in contemporary Buddhist organisations play a role similar to that of any chief executive officer. An excellence case in point is the Chief Abbot of Fo Guang Shan Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia (FGS), Venerable Jue Cheng. The FGS monastery was started in Taiwan by Master Hsing Yun and has since then expanded worldwide. Venerable Jue Cheng was posted to Brazil, and there, she initiated projects to save street kids; she soon gained recognition among the local society as well as back home at headquarters in Taiwan. Subsequently, she was relocated to Malaysia as chief abbot. Under her leadership, FGS grew with a Singapore branch being set up, and their mission has since then extended to Indonesia. Her role is exactly like that of a regional

chief executive of a multinational company covering three countries. The only difference is that she follows dharma principles in her leadership and management by taking care of her own and of followers' humanistic development.

## **Conclusion**

In essence, Buddhist humanistic leadership offers an exciting framework for addressing contemporary leadership challenges. Its emphasis on compassion, mindfulness, and roundedness in thinking can contribute significantly to the creating of leaders who prioritize both the well-being of individuals as well as of society at large.

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