A Brief of Buddhist Philanthropy in the Mainland of China

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Abstract: The Buddhist philanthropy has a glorious history in China. It does not only initiates many new modes of charity works, which like the first private benevolent hospital, the first charitable gerocomium, and the earliest charitable foundation; but also it positively promotes the Chinese social welfare works, which like the establishment of the first official charitable department; and mainly these philanthropic activities are produced and practiced by the Buddhist monks. Unfortunately, the Buddhist philanthropy has undergone a series of striking in modern times; and owing to many reasons, the Buddhist philanthropy has stayed low for forty years, so this is the reason for no one knows about the condition of the Buddhist philanthropy of mainland in modern times. In fact, the Chinese Buddhist sangha in the mainland has never stopped trying to practice the philanthropy for helping people, although it is really an arduous process of rebirth in the modern times.

1. Paraphrase of Philanthropy

The term “PHILANTHROPY” originates from ancient Greek, what means “human love”. In Chinese, the Philanthropy was translated as “Ci-Shan” (慈善), which combines two parts “Ci” and “Shan”. The word “Ci (慈)” means “Kind”, compassion, merciful love, and benevolence, it is also consist of two parts as upper part “兹” which means here or further, and the lower part “心” means heart, thus “Ci” means the heart is here and paid more attention, most time it is be known as sympathy, just like the Buddha kind for living being. The word “Shan (善)” means “Good”, glorious, auspicious and happiness. If the parents love their children could be called “Ci”, then the human loving each other could be called “Shan”. The benevolence love is “Ci”, and succor who needs help is “Shan”.

2. The Buddhist Philanthropy In Ancient China

The popularizing of philanthropy by archaic Chinese is not only for the self-restraint, but also for the calamitous condition. In fact, China is a calamitous country since its birth, and there are a great number of disasters could be found in the historical recordings. Fortunately, the Buddhism preaches into China to bring a huge effect to the traditional philanthropy. Especially the ideas of “Mercy” and “Compassion” which are the most important doctrines in Mahāyāna Buddhism, they are two indispensable requirements for everyone to attain the Buddhahood, and the mercy has be promoted as one of highest level realms of the Buddhist saints.

The term “Mercy” in Chinese as “Ci-Bei(慈悲)”, the meaning includes both of Sanskrit words “Mettā (मेत्ता)” and “Karunā (करुणा)”, it is the root doctrine of many teachings of Lord Buddha, like “Brahmavihāras” and “Six Pāramitā”. Mercy in Buddhism is not only compassion or pity on someone, but it is a pure kindness for the sake of saving all beings, it is a real widely love to all lives. Moreover, the mercy is also a kind of practice of the theory “Sunya”. There are lots of doctrines of Lord Buddha...
is taught about mercy in sutras, for example in the past lives of the Śākyamuni Buddha, he uses to cut his fresh to feed starving eagle and suicide to feed starving tigers. In the Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra, Lord Buddha says: “Mercy can give all sentient beings happiness, and compassion can help all sentient beings cast off suffering.” The mercy and compassion are the theoretical evidence of the Buddhist philanthropy. Depend on the mercy, Lord Buddha encourages all of disciples should practice the charity activities. He claims that the grantees are as same as the field of merits, and there is the place where people will nurture and develop their meritorious virtues——this is one of significant points of the Buddhist theories, in Sanskrit as “Puṇya-Kṣetra”. Lord Buddha tells us that there are eight kinds of Puṇya-कṣetra: 1. Mending road and digging well; 2. Construct bridge; 3. Reclaim dangerous place; 4. Show filial respect to their parents; 5. Provide the Buddhist Sangha; 6. Cure patients; 7. Help anyone in danger; 8. Hold vegetarian meeting.” In other Sūtra, the Buddha also points seven Puṇya-कṣetra for practice: “1. Build statues of the Buddha and vihara for Sangha; 2. Construct bathing rooms and plant fruit trees; 3. Offer medicines for patients; 4. Build a ship to ferry travelers; 5. Construct bridge; 6. Dig well near road for travelers; 7. Build lavatory for people.” These doctrines became more popular in archaic China, and for following Lord Buddha’s teachings, the Chinese Buddhists even painting this Sūtra on the wall in Mogao Grotto of Dunhuang during North Zhou Dynasty, that means the Buddhist philanthropy of society has already very popular at that moment.

No.144, “The Painting Transform from Puṇya-Kṣetra Sūtra”, North Zhou Dynasty (557–581 CE), East of roof of the 296 Grotto, Dunhuang, China

The Buddhist philanthropy would start from the movement of the Buddhism spread into China when the period of East Han Dynasty (25–220 CE), and the most popular charity actions of Buddhist philanthropy are probably the helping poor, children or elders and relief disaster victims. In fact, the Buddhism has the advantage to do the charity works, which because of the Buddhism is invited by imperial families as a honorable guest, and it gets large number of supplements, so the Buddhism is the only folk organization which possesses both the intention and ability for philanthropic activities at that moment, thus the Buddhist monastery became the first non-governmental organization for charity works.

The Buddhist philanthropy in ancient China has a wonderful development, and it mightily influences the government and celebrities. In the South Qi Dynasty, the prince Xiao Zi-liang and Xiao Chang-mao who are both fond of the Buddhism, so they co-establish a private philanthropic organization which is named “Liu- ji-guan”, it is the place to look after patients, and bestow food or clothes. The “Liu- ji-guan” is the first private philanthropic organization in Chinese history.

Next, the first philanthropic official department in Chinese history is called “Gu-du-yuan”, which is also relevant with the Buddhism. It is established by the King Wu of Liang Dynasty in 521 CE, “the King order to build the Gu-du-yuan in the capital, provide for the aged and orphan, help them to leave any troubles of lives, and he will also make funeral arrangements when someone pass away.”

During the Sui and Tang Dynasty, the Buddhist monk Xin Xing who is the founder of the “Three Ages Buddhism School”, he proposes to establish a Buddhist charitable foundation “The Inexhaustible
Treasury” to collect fund only for charity works. This is the first folk charitable foundation in Chinese history. Although the School is deemed as a heresy in the later periods, the system of Charitable Foundation has been kept in the monastery for the next one thousand years by only changing the names.

The philanthropy in ancient China could be understood as two parts which are the governmental and non-governmental works. Most of charity actions in ancient times belong to governmental reliefs, but the alms are not only for philanthropy, they are more inclined to stabilize society for their regime. The Buddhist philanthropy is a pure benevolence for the people who need help, as they consider the philanthropy is just the practicing of the Buddhism. Secondly, the social welfare in ancient China is the major responsibility of the government, but the Buddhist philanthropy grows very fast, and even it leads the folk charity works in the society. Thirdly, the governmental philanthropy always supports the Buddhist charity for their believing or their rules, and the Buddhist philanthropy also positively assistant the nation to do relief and help people. In one word, the Buddhist philanthropy promotes the traditional charity works very much.

3. The Modern Buddhist Philanthropy In The Mainland

The Buddhist philanthropy of China in modern times, in fact, it exactly starts in the later period of Qing Dynasty (1875~1911) and the Republic of China (1911~1949). The “Movement of Impose Monastery Property for Education” and the “Invasion of Japan” extremely impact the development process of the Buddhist philanthropy in the mainland. After the establishment of the New China in 1949 CE, the philanthropic culture, which includes the Buddhist charity, has been dealt a heavy blow. Until 1978 CE, the “Eleventh Representative Conference of Communist Party” has been held in Beijing, this is the turning point for the Buddhist philanthropy to indicate the philanthropy will recover, hence the Buddhist philanthropy starts its reviving simultaneously.

The Buddhist Philanthropy of mainland in modern times could be divided into three stages, they are: the Stage of Germination, The Stage of Development, and The Stage of Reviving.

(1) The Stage of Germination

In this stage, although the Buddhist sangha mainly pays attention to rebuild the monasteries and reorganize the sangha, they still did some of philanthropy at that moment, whatever it was only the beginning of recovery.

The Buddhist philanthropy restarts should be in 1984 CE. On 15th of March the “Foundation of China for Disabled Persons” has been established in Beijing, and the “Chinese Buddhists Association” donates 50,000 CNY to the Foundation, and the Buddhist Association send a little claims that “We Buddhists deem that supporting the welfare activities is also the practice of the Buddhism, and the main content of altruistic purposes. Therefore, our association will plunk for your disabled welfare charity, and show our wholeheartedly and actively support.” This is the first time for the Buddhism declares to practice philanthropy in public after New China establishment, since then the Buddhists have continually been doing more and more charity activities.

(2) The Stage of Development

As the revived and development of the Buddhism, the Buddhists have almost rebuilt most of monasteries, so the Sangha has more strength to participate the philanthropy in the society.

The flood disaster of East China in 1991 becomes an opportunity for the Buddhist to expand the philanthropy. In consideration of this disaster is so serious, the government first time publicly asks
help to the world. Hence, the Buddhist Sangha appeals all Buddhists to donate money for disaster relief. Few days later, the Chinese Buddhists Association collects 5,000,000 CNY for the disaster victims, so the government awards the Buddhists a glory of “The Advanced Model Organization for Relief Work”.

Meanwhile, there are some new Buddhist charitable organizations establish in the country, like in December of 1994, the “Charity Foundation of South Pu-tuo Monastery” formally establishes, it is the first Buddhist charity foundation in the mainland which possess the corporate capacity organization by registering in the “Civil Affairs Department” of the government. It indicates the full-scale rebirth of the Buddhist philanthropy in the mainland.

(3) The Stage of Reviving

It is the period after twenty-first century, especially after the relief of Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 CE, the Buddhist philanthropy in the mainland has developed faster and faster. There are lots of Buddhist charity organizations have been established, and the idea of Buddhist compassion has been upheld by all common people. Along with the strength of monasteries increasing, the Buddhists have participated in more charity actions, even the international relief. In this stage, the government also recognized the Buddhist philanthropy is a very important strength of society, thus it turns to consummate the policy to help development of the Buddhist philanthropy. So, there are four points to help us to understand how Buddhist philanthropy reviving in this stage: (1). More organizations establish; (2). Taking part in massively relief activities; (3). Joining the international reliefs; (4). Legislation to help the development of the Buddhist philanthropy.

4. The Method of the Buddhist Charity

In the Mainland

The Buddhist philanthropy in the mainland mainly inherits the traditional methods, and some of excellent tradition Buddhist charities have already become a prat of culture, like the “Laba festival” which is a famous traditional festival but source from the Buddhism. As the reason of the lower productivity in ancient times, most of the traditional Buddhist philanthropic actions are material reliefs. Except the disaster relief, there are many daily charity activities for helping people by the Buddhists, for example:

1. Beneficent contribution;
2. Build bridge and road;
3. Publicly distribute foods for famine victims;
4. Dig well and channel water;
5. Adopt orphans;
6. Look after aged;
7. Look after patient;
8. Build sanitary;
9. Build public common bathing pool;
10. Build a ship for free crossing the rivers;
11. Construct a public library;
12. Build street lamp at darker area;
13. Build pagoda, pavilions, terraces and open halls;
14. Harbor refugees;
15. Free captive animals;
16. Sponsor children for education;
17. Establish an organization free to teach people living skills;
18. Comfort the anguished people by the Buddhism;

Although most of the methods as above still keep practicing, as the time is changing, except few outlying villages, many works are inappropriate today, e.g. building public bathing room, some of
them are the liability only belong to the government. Fortunately, the Buddhists have already organized some new charity works for new era, especially they combine the Buddhist culture and philanthropic practicing together, thus the Buddhist charity actions could possess own characters, for example:

(1) Philanthropic Super Market;
(2) Buddhist philanthropic hospital;
(3) Reward dutiful children;
(4) Hold the Buddhist sports meet;
(5) Conduct the Buddhist summer camp;
(6) Voluntary works in community;
(7) The Buddhist charitable back card;
(8) The Buddhist fellowship for education;
(9) The Buddhist gerocomium;
(10) The Buddhist hot line.

All these new Buddhist charity modes have brought a great influence in the society. In despite some people complain the Buddhist shouldn’t collected money like business even for charity, these method supply substantial help for development of the Buddhist philanthropy in the mainland. The monks and laypeople with their altruistic ideal to practice Buddhist beneficent activities, and the smiling faces of beneficiaries are the best evidence.

Peroration

The Buddhist philanthropy is not only one of the best methods for preaching Dharma, but also as a bridge for express the Buddhist compassion. The Buddhist philanthropy as a universal love, breaks the demarcation line of race, rank and nation, it is achieves the equal ideology of all beings through its actions. In a full of material desire of the world, the Buddhism has assumed the responsibility to find back the good nature of mankind’s heart. To carry forward the Buddhist philanthropy is very helpful for individual and society. Although for a variety of reasons, the Buddhist charity in mainland still has many defects, comparatively revive in such thirty years, the Buddhists charity in the mainland had already created countless brilliant, and gain lots of praises, reveal our Buddhists’ breadth of mind. The Buddhist philanthropy in mainland of China is still growing up, it keeps inheriting, learning and innovating, the Buddhists have never stopped resuscitate the Buddhist charity. Maybe after several decenniums years, the people in the world will not only know about the “Tzu Chi” of Taiwan, but will also know the “Ci-shan” of the mainland.

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vi “Liu-ji-guan”, means the six sicknesses. There are six kind of sickness in Chinese medical science, they are cold, heat, four limbs, belly, encephalopathy and heart attack, but generally it indicates all kinds of sickness.