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## Compassion, Unity and Humanity: Understanding the Spiritual Heritage of Han Buddhism in Its Past, Present and Future\*

Ven. Xuecheng

Now, it is my great honor to discuss with you the past, present and future of Han Buddhism.

It is well-known that Buddhism began to spread from India into China at roughly the same time as the birth of Jesus Christ. It eventually became integrated with the native culture of China, gradually developing into a particular form of Buddhism with unique Chinese features. Chinese Buddhism has become a significant part of the Chinese culture, and China has been called by many “the second home of Buddhism.” Buddhism reached different regions of China at different times, through different paths, contributing to the formation of a diverse Buddhist heritage, which includes Han Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Theravada Buddhism in Yunnan Province of China. Today we will discuss Han Buddhism.

Buddhism was first brought to China during the two Han dynasties (206 BCE–220 CE). Over the course of nearly 2,000 years, Chinese Buddhists have translated Buddhist scriptures, conducted research into

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\* This speech was made on Nov. 23, 2014 at King’s College Chapel, University of Cambridge. Ven. Xuecheng was invited by Professor Dame Caroline Humphrey, Lady Rees of Ludlow, DBE FBA on behalf of the Department of Social Anthropology to visit the University of Cambridge and give a speech on Han Buddhism.

the original principles of Buddhism, compiled collections of Buddhist literature, classified Buddhist teachings and established various sects, thereby successfully integrating a foreign religion into their own native Chinese culture. Han Buddhism is a shining example of the integration of different civilizations—Indian and Chinese—and has become one of the three major constituents of Chinese culture, along with Taoism and Confucianism.

How, then, do we get to grips with the innate spirituality of Han Buddhism and avoid getting lost in a sea of scriptures? For example one can be distracted by narrow interpretation, quarrels arising from sectarian differences, or textual criticisms of the validity of Han Buddhism. Modern concepts such as “science,” “democracy” and “human rights” are also used to judge Han Buddhism and find it wanting.

These questions are certainly very important, for they are bound up with how Chinese Buddhism inherits its past, what its status is in the present, and how it develops in the future. I cannot provide answers to these questions. The only thing I can do is to propose a way of thinking. In this talk I’m going to summarize the essence of Han Buddhism in three key words: compassion, unity and humanity.

## I. Compassion

Compassion is one of the most important concepts in Buddhism, and constitutes its essence as well. Compassion is built on the basis of the Buddhist conception of No-self and Dependent Origination—nothing can exist independently but comes into being through multiple causes. It was out of compassion that the Buddha created Buddhism. Compassion also manifests the Buddhist values and ethic principles. Compassion is a dual virtue, giving happiness to all sentient beings and relieving their pain. The Great Origins, *The Long Chronology*, records, “Out of compassion, he expounded the Four Noble Truths.” Mahayana Buddhism inherited and developed the idea and spirit of compassion. *A Treatise on the Great Wisdom to Enlightenment* says that “Compassion is the