



**CARRYING FORWARD  
CLASSICAL CHINESE WISDOM  
TO BRING PEACE AND PURPOSE  
TO MODERN LIFE**

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I would like to rejoice in the dedicated efforts of the volunteers of the Association for the Application of Classical Chinese Culture in inheriting and promoting traditional Chinese culture. The Association is committed to this very mission: carrying forward the valuable traditions of Chinese culture. As Chinese, our inheritance stems from two aspects: one is the bloodline, which is our physical traits inherited from our parents, forming our material bodies; the other is the moral tradition. As one of the Four Great Ancient Civilizations, China boasts a long history and rich cultural heritage, which shape our spiritual life, character, and quality of

life. Therefore, it is not enough to just possess a Chinese-looking appearance; we should also embody the spiritual heritage of Chinese culture.

Many overseas Chinese are concerned that their children may grow up disconnected from Chinese cultural roots. But many children already do. They inherit the skin color from the East, but inside, they possess a completely Westernized mentality. However, if we fail to carry forward the valuable Chinese culture, despite living in China, we similarly lack the essential traits and are Chinese in appearance only.

As material life reaches new heights, society pressures us to seek happiness, meaning, and security from the external world. However, when we immerse ourselves in this pursuit, we realize that the external world we depend on is increasingly uncertain—causing many to feel anxious, depressed, or devoid of meaning. In such times, we must ask ourselves where life's true peace and purpose lie—in external material conditions, or in the

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inner life itself? Without a proper answer to this question,  
it is impossible for us to live a meaningful and fulfilling  
life.

# I

## THE DILEMMA OF MODERN CIVILIZATION

Modern civilization has developed under the influence of humanism. The Renaissance and the Enlightenment advanced culture, art, philosophy, and science, while also giving rise to the capitalist system. Under the dual forces of private ownership and the market economy, instrumental rationality and consumerism have become dominant trends in society. Instrumental rationality emphasizes high efficiency, where businesses strive to expand output to maximize profits. Consumerism ensures that, to absorb the ever-growing supply, demand must keep pace. Simply put: when there's a need, we meet it; when there isn't, we



create one.

## 1. Characteristics of Consumerism

In the past, our consumption was rather simple, mainly to fulfill basic needs such as food, clothing, housing, and transportation. However, much of today's consumption is linked to identity. For example, the type of car we drive and the neighborhood we live in now signify our social class; the model of phone we use and the grade of coffee we drink now reflect our lifestyle and taste. Goods have gone from functional to symbolic, creating artificial hierarchies. Our social class has also shifted to be highly dependent on consumption abilities. This notion can lead to identity crisis, causing individuals to engage in unnecessary consumption to achieve upward mobility.

In the past, due to inconvenient transportation, people primarily engaged in local consumption. This, to some extent, limited their desire to consume. However, today, purchasing goods from distant places or even from other

countries is just a few taps away on a smartphone. By turning shopping into festivals and pushing intense, non-stop live streaming, businesses keep consumers in a cycle of impulse-driven consumption. Events like “618” and “Double 11” turned shopping into a collective frenzy, leaving many lost in a tide of consumption. Additionally, the temptations of sales and promotions, plus the persuasive language used by advertisements and influencers, drive people to make irrational purchases, hoarding things they don’t need now—and perhaps never will.

The rapid upgrades of electronic devices have also created significant demand. Take phones, for example—people used to replace them only when they broke. Now, new models are released every year, sometimes even every few months. Although older models still work and may not be any worse in quality, they’re rendered obsolete by design, all for the sake of profit. From a manufacturer’s perspective, a phone that lasts five or ten years means fewer sales and less profit; but to maintain profit growth, they have to keep producing more. Therefore, they

intentionally create a sense of dissatisfaction, making you feel left behind if you don't keep up with the trends. You think you're buying for yourself—but in reality, you're also footing the bill for the company's profits.

Another example is credit entrapment, which lowers the borrowing threshold and encourages people to spend in advance. Nowadays, many people take out loans to buy houses and cars, which puts them in debt. To repay these loans, they must work hard to earn money. At the same time, their consumption doesn't stop. So they must keep working—trapping themselves in a cycle of work and spending. In the end, they become slaves to their mortgages and car loans.

Moreover, the precise recommendations of major digital platforms trap consumers in an information cocoon and an algorithmic fortress, making it nearly impossible to escape. Whatever you like, the platform will keep feeding you more of it. Some items may not be necessary at all, but when you're constantly surrounded by related

advertisements, it's hard to resist the temptation—and you start to believe the purchase is essential.

Such business models are causing people to lose themselves in the endless pursuit of external desires, leaving little time to contemplate what their consumption is really for—or what it actually brings them. Western philosophers have reflected on this issue. For example, Max Weber proposed the concepts of instrumental rationality and value rationality. He argued that modern businesses prioritize maximizing profit through instrumental rationality, while neglecting value rationality in the process. Unbearable consequences await humanity if we care only for profit while turning a blind eye to ethics, the environment, and the world's future. Two thousand years ago, ancient Chinese were already thinking about the relationship between morality and profit, suggesting that only by balancing the two can we achieve sustainable development.

## 2. The Dilemma of Modern Civilization

As technology advances and productivity improves, people now enjoy far better material conditions than ever before. However, people are not becoming happier; instead, various problems have arisen, especially in the following areas:

First, there is an increasing number of patients with mental illnesses. For instance, the number of people diagnosed with depression increases every year. This phenomenon is common in both developed and developing countries.

Second, there is a sense of emptiness among people. As people solely focus on pursuing immediate economic benefits while ignoring moral values, they are clueless about the ultimate meaning of life.

Third, excessive internal competition has become a serious problem. In many industries, individuals face intense—even cutthroat—rivalry, and must work twice

as hard just to survive and grow.

Fourth, there is an increasing wealth disparity. Allegedly, 1% of the world's population holds 45% of the world's total wealth. Humanism of Western philosophy initially intended to establish an equal and free society. However, the prevalence of capitalism and the excessive pursuit of economic growth have led to wealth disparity and social stratification. The ideal of freedom has become unachievable—confined in the iron cage of rationality.

Fifth, interpersonal relationships are becoming increasingly alienated. Many wholesome relationships have turned into interest-based connections under the influence of commercialization. Innocent, pure love in family, romantic relationship and friendship have turned sour when they are linked with self-benefits.

Sixth, there is an ecological crisis. The unrestrained exploitation of the earth's resources, along with the pollution and waste generated during production and

consumption, has caused widespread damage to the air, land, and water. In recent years, extreme weather has repeatedly broken historical records, and disasters such as earthquakes and floods have occurred with increasing frequency.

I believe we are all familiar with the issues above. We may have experienced them ourselves or have seen them reported in the media.

From the perspective of Buddhism, none of these phenomena are accidental—they arise from causes and conditions. The causes and conditions we create will lead to corresponding living conditions and environments. This is especially important today, as the government encourages having a “scientific outlook on development.” Although we live in different parts of the world, we share the earth’s ecosystem. If the system is ruined, where else can we call home? To resolve these dilemmas, we need to examine the following questions:

First, being versus having. As I often say: “Who you are is much more important than what you own.” Why do I always emphasize this? Because modern people focus too much on their possessions rather than on “who they are.” Our society tends to measure success primarily by material wealth. Rankings like Forbes and the Hurun Report rank individuals according to their net worth. Under this societal influence, people have begun to normalize the idea of “despising the poor rather than the immoral,” believing that money-making is the ultimate truth and that accumulating possessions is the definition of success. Under this standard, how much are morality and wisdom worth? This leads to a growing neglect of inner qualities. Thus, we need to seriously reflect on which is more important— “who we are” or “what we possess.”

Second, true needs versus false needs. The true needs of life are few, while false needs are limitless and ever-invented. Consider the products we buy: are they truly necessary, or are they merely desires created by social



media and advertisements? Without the wisdom to distinguish true needs from false ones, we will be stuck in an endless cycle of buying and earning, eventually exhausting our lives on unnecessary purchases.

Third, real identity versus false identity. As mentioned earlier, modern people often associate consumption with identity. We believe that what we purchase signifies our identity or status. But in the end, no matter our identity, we are human beings first. We should think from the perspective of our true selves, rather than being bound by the false identities created by society or our imaginations. These identities make us feel that we must act in certain ways to conform to “our identity,” eventually wasting our lives living in an illusion.

In today’s world swept by consumerism, it is extremely important to remain clear-headed. Otherwise, we risk falling into the trap of meaningless consumption—wasting not only money, but also the time and life we spend earning it.

## II

### MIND OR MATTER: WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT?

Realizing the problems with modern civilization, how can we live a healthy life in this era? We need to inherit Eastern wisdom and re-examine the world. In the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche said that “God is dead,” and called for a re-evaluation of all values. Today, we face a similar question. The world consists of two dimensions: the spiritual and the material. Traditional wisdom from both the East and the West emphasizes the importance of the spiritual world. However, with the advancement of technology, people are increasingly focused on material pursuits, losing themselves in the

process. Thus, we must ask ourselves: which is more important, the material or the spiritual? This is a crucial question.

### 1. From the Perspective of Happiness

I once gave a talk called “Happiness Comes from the Mind.” Why did I choose to explore this topic? As society progressed, we have witnessed a shift from poverty to wealth, from material scarcity to abundance. Many of us were once convinced that financial security was the key to a happy life. Many people today have indeed become wealthy—owning several properties and having savings that could last a lifetime. The question arises: Are they truly happy? The answer is often no, with many experiencing an increase in personal troubles and mental health issues, and a growing sense of unhappiness.

We do not deny that happiness is related to material conditions—after all, without necessities like food and water, happiness is hardly possible. However, once our

basic survival needs are met, the key to happiness increasingly depends on our mindset. Confucianism speaks of the joy of Confucius and Yan Hui—where does their happiness lie? From Confucius’ own words, “Eating simple food, drinking water, a bended arm for a pillow—there’s happiness in these things too,” and his praise of Yan Hui, “Living in a narrow alley, sustained by a basket of grain and gourd full of water—other people could not have borne such hardship, yet it never spoiled Hui’s joy,” we can see that this kind of happiness arises from inner spiritual richness, and is not diminished by material poverty.

Buddhism also contains many similar accounts, with Chan masters living in extreme simplicity by rivers and in forests yet feeling no lack. As captured in the beautiful lines, “In a pond of the leaves of water lotus, I never worried about clothing; with the flowers of a few pine trees, my food was abundant.” This is because they have realized the inner completeness of life, which allows them to remain at peace under any circumstances.

In contrast, modern people, despite possessing great material wealth—even fortunes worth billions—often feel unfulfilled due to inner emptiness. They continue to seek security through constant consumption and accumulation, yet psychological issues such as depression and anxiety persist. This shows that the true source of happiness lies within the mind, while material goods are merely supporting conditions.

## 2. From the Perspective of Social Endorsement

In recent decades, the people most admired in society have often been those with wealth and power. Career success and material wealth have become dominant values for the public. But when we look back through history, both the East and the West, who are the figures that have truly stood the test of time and left lasting influence? Whether it is Laozi and Confucius in China, the Buddha in India, or the ancient Greek philosophers, it is their virtue, wisdom, and compassion that have allowed them to be studied, emulated, and followed for centuries. In

Confucianism, the ideal of a meaningful life is captured in the concept of the “Three Imperishables”—to establish one’s merit, virtue, and teachings. Among these, moral accomplishment is considered the highest, followed by contributions to society, and then by the legacy of writing. These are the things of enduring worth.

Therefore, we should view social respect and recognition from a historical perspective, not merely from the lens of the present moment. Possessing morals, wisdom, and compassion carries far greater meaning than wealth for our life. That’s because, unlike wealth, which only has temporary value and can be lost at any time, morals, wisdom, and compassion have the power to change our mindsets and improve our quality of life. They benefit not only our present moment but can bring lasting value over many lifetimes.

### **3. From the Perspective of the Relationship Between Mind and Matter**

To live in this world, one must have basic material conditions—this is a practical concern for everyone. So, what is the relationship between the mind and material things? Is the mind a product of material existence, or is material nothing more than images arising from the mind? This has been a philosophical inquiry for centuries.

According to the Dharma, the mind is the source of everything—the very essence of the mind is the essence of the universe itself. However, the world we perceive is shaped by our own cognitive system. Modern science has discovered that the observable material universe accounts for less than 5% of the total mass-energy of the cosmos. The rest—over 95%—consists of dark matter and dark energy, which are invisible to us. This is almost unimaginable—and it also reveals how extremely limited our cognitive system is in comparison to the boundless nature of the mind. What we see is a tiny fragment of what truly exists.

Furthermore, our cognitive system can also create

distortions. Have you ever worn a VR headset? Once you put it on, everything you see feels incredibly real. If what appears in front of you is a cliff, even though you know it isn't real, you still hesitate to take a step forward—because your mind has already been influenced by the false information projected by the VR. In Buddhism, the five-aggregate body is like an inborn VR system. We assume the world is just as we perceive it—but in truth, it is shaped and filtered by our own “VR system.” Some may ask: if that's the case, why do we all see more or less the same world? Because our VR systems are all generated by shared karmic forces of the human realm, and have certain common features. If you were to switch to the VR system of a cat or dog, you would experience an entirely different world—their world.

Western humanism advocates for rationality, which emphasizes autonomy in how we understand the world—the capacity of thinking critically and making one's own judgments. This is extremely important. However, in today's world, where we are constantly overwhelmed by



information pushed through digital platforms and smart-phones, we often get lost without realizing it. So, how can we remain clear-minded and maintain the autonomy of our lives in a world overflowing with material desire? Without spiritual practice, it is extremely difficult.

Buddhism teaches that although the mind is clouded by ignorance and afflictions, it also possesses the innate capacity for self-liberation. This ability is not something external—it is inherently present within us. The key lies in recognizing it and unlocking this potential. To do so, we must re-evaluate our values and gain a correct understanding of the relationship between mind and matter. The government has also been promoting a two-fold civilization initiative, urging us to improve material well-being and cultivate spiritual culture. Such development is rooted in preserving and promoting our rich traditional Chinese culture.

# III

## CARRYING FORWARD EASTERN WISDOM TO REBUILD HUMANISTIC SPIRIT

The West values humanism, which emphasizes reason, freedom, and equality, and empowers individuals to become masters of their own lives. Similarly, Confucianism in China also embodies a humanistic spirit, but it is rooted in a moral philosophy with the aim of “learning to be human.” The first step is to learn how to be a worthy person—to become a noble individual who embodies the qualities of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness, as well as gentleness, kindness, courtesy, restraint, magnanimity. From there, one

may advance toward becoming a sage. In the past, we may have thought these ideals were outdated. But think about it: If someone truly possesses such moral qualities—loving others as themselves, acting with fairness, behaving properly, distinguishing right from wrong, and being consistent in their words and actions, while also demonstrating refined conduct of being gentle, kind, modest, disciplined, and courteous—wouldn't that be beautiful? Wouldn't we all hope to have such people around us?

### 1. Cultivate the Self to Serve the World

Society is made up of countless individuals. When each person is physically and mentally healthy, society will naturally be harmonious and stable. The Confucian classic the *Great Learning* presents a philosophy that begins with self-cultivation, and from there extends to regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world. Self-cultivation sets the foundation for everything, including the social responsibilities one

assumes. How does one cultivate oneself? In the *Analects*, Confucius teaches us through both his words and personal example—guiding us in how to be a person of virtue. In the *Great Learning*, the method is laid out more systematically through four steps: rectifying the mind, making thoughts sincere, extending knowledge, and investigating things—as the text says: “Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lies in the investigation of things.”

In Buddhist teachings, “rectifying the mind” is similar to cultivating “right understanding.” Each person has their own cognitive framework, which includes mistaken views, personal likes and dislikes, etc. These elements can lead to distorted perceptions and make it difficult to view things objectively. To “rectify the mind” means to maintain clarity and awareness, free from emotional agitation. This allows one to perceive and respond to

situations objectively.

How to rectify the mind? We must start with sincerity, being truthful without deceiving others or ourselves. Confucianism places great importance on self-discipline in solitude—even when one is alone, one should speak and act with caution, never lowering their moral standards. The attitude guideline at Mindful Peace Academy also highlights the importance of being honest, earnest, and committed, which aligns with this principle.

How does one achieve sincerity of thoughts? It must be done through investigating things and extending knowledge. In Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism and Wang Yangming's School of Mind, the interpretation of *gewu* (investigating things) differs. Zhu Xi believed that principle (the universal law) is inherent in things, and therefore *gewu* means to explore and understand the principles through the study of external objects—this is the idea of “investigating things to the utmost.” Wang Yangming, however, taught that the mind is principle. In his view,

gewu is not about studying external things, but about rectifying the mind, clearing away inner defilement, attachments, and afflictions. In fact, they are both correct, because principle exists both behind external things and within the mind. It's just that investigating the mind is relatively easier, while investigating things requires the insight of emptiness—the understanding that all phenomena are conditioned and provisional, without inherent self-nature. They are like clouds in the sky—they coexist with the sky, yet never obstruct the vastness of space. Without the wisdom of dependent origination, people tend to see things as solid and real: a table is just a table, bamboo is just bamboo. However, if one holds onto their fixed identity, the insight of emptiness cannot arise. That's why Wang Yangming felt Zhu Xi's approach was misguided, and instead chose to investigate principle through the mind.

What Wang Yangming referred to as “the extension of knowledge” is, in essence, the realization of one's innate moral conscience. The practices of rectifying the mind,

making thoughts sincere, and investigating things—all aim to awaken this inner conscience, and to live and act by it. This also reflects the integration of Confucianism and Buddhist teachings, and it is the core idea of Yangming philosophy. The key question is: How can one awaken this conscience? Wang Yangming attained enlightenment at Longchang and was revered as a sage. But how many people have truly attained enlightenment through studying his philosophy alone? The reason is that enlightenment requires a practical method—and this is where Buddhism excels. In Buddhist texts such as the *Jingde Record of the Transmission of the Lamp*, accounts of awakened masters are abundant.

Rectifying the mind, making thoughts sincere, investigating things, and extending knowledge are the foundations of self-cultivation. Today, due to the lack of a broader environment that honors morality, moral doctrines alone hold little power. Therefore, we need to develop inner motivation for self-cultivation. With a cultivated character, one can then go on to bring harmony

to the family, govern the nation, and bring peace to the world—progressing from perfecting personal virtue to benefiting society.

“From being a good person to doing meaningful deeds” is the guiding principle in traditional Chinese culture. Only by cultivating oneself can one maintain moral integrity in the process of doing things. On one hand, we act and live guided by the pursuit of virtue and personal refinement; on the other hand, it is through how we act and live that we fulfill that very pursuit. Without this mindset, people often consider self-interest as the ultimate goal and seek to maximize it in their actions. When the pursuit of self-interest conflicts with moral principles, they may disregard ethics for personal gain. In today’s interconnected society, such behavior not only harms others but also makes themselves victims in the process.

## 2. From a Pure Mind to a Pure Land

When it comes to the principles of being a good person



and doing meaningful deeds, Buddhist teachings and Confucian thought share common ground, which is why Buddhism could blend seamlessly with native Chinese culture after it was introduced. In Confucianism, self-cultivation and moral integrity represent personal development, while managing the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world, as well as establishing merit and expressing ideas, reflect a sense of social responsibility. It advocates progressing from being a good person to doing meaningful deeds—from cultivating oneself to benefiting the broader world.

Likewise, Buddhism emphasizes awakening oneself and others, benefiting oneself and others as its ultimate goal. This is especially true in Mahayana Buddhism, which emphasizes developing bodhicitta—the aspiration to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Like the buddhas and bodhisattvas, one takes the mission of benefiting others as a sacred duty, not only seeking personal liberation but also vowing to lead all beings toward liberation. Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva has made the

vow— “If I do not go to Hell to help the suffering beings there, who else will go?” Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva’s boundless compassion is expressed through “a thousand hands and eyes to help all in need.” As described in the sutra, “A thousand pleas will receive a thousand responses—in this sea of suffering he is the boat that ferries all across.” These words and actions fully embody the Bodhisattvas’ altruistic aspiration and practice.

Whether in personal cultivation or in altruistic practice, Buddhism can complement the shortcomings of traditional Chinese culture. This is because Buddhism is a profound wisdom of life. While it sets moral standards, it also thoroughly examines the nature of life and the interplay between mind and world. It helps us understand that practicing morality is not merely a demand imposed by society or external forces, but rather a fundamental need of life itself. If we wish to elevate ourselves, we must follow and refine our moral conduct.

Buddhism teaches that life has two dimensions: the

deluded mind and the true mind, affliction and awakening, confusion and enlightenment. Therefore, the first step is to confront the weaknesses of life. The West places great emphasis on law, precisely to address human weaknesses—to prevent those weaknesses from harming oneself or others. If human weaknesses are not addressed, even morality can be misused. I once discussed with philosopher Zhou Guoping on the similarities and differences between Buddhism and Western humanism. While Western humanism advocates personal freedom, Buddhism—also deeply human-centered—speaks of liberation through spiritual awakening. Though freedom and liberation may seem similar, they point to very different ends. Western humanism arose as a rebellion against medieval religious theocracy—seeking to free people from religious repression. This led to the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and modern civilization. But it also released the negative side of human nature: as long as one doesn't harm others or break the law, anything becomes permissible. This lack of restraint has led many into a state of decay, indulgence, and self-destruction.

The liberation in Buddhism is grounded in a deep understanding of the human mind and nature. It involves eliminating negative tendencies and awakening one's positive potential. A well-known Buddhist teaching says, "Diligently observe precepts, practice concentration, and cultivate wisdom; extinguish greed, hatred, and ignorance." This provides a practical and effective path for personal cultivation. By observing precepts and developing meditative concentration, we can realize our awakening nature and ultimately free ourselves from delusion and afflictions—breaking away from the deep-rooted negative tendencies accumulated since beginningless time. With this foundation, we can move forward toward awakening and liberation.

When it comes to altruism, many people today are enthusiastic about charity, but often find it difficult to sustain their efforts over time. The Department of Psychology at Fudan University once held a forum titled "Making a Loving Heart More Powerful" targeted at charitable workers. I was invited to give a talk and speak

with psychology professors. In charitable work, we sometimes come across recipients who lack manners—they accept help but show no gratitude. On the other hand, some donors are driven by impure motives, leading them to become overly concerned with gains and losses. How should we view these issues? We need to be clear about what charity truly is. As I see it, charity is a practice of compassion.

First and foremost, one must hold a sense of care and compassion for the broader society. Only when actions are carried out with love and compassion can they truly be called “charity.” From the perspective of Buddhist teachings, performing the same good deed may either cultivate compassion or reinforce attachment to the ego—the difference lies in one’s intention. So, how can charity become a true practice of altruism and compassion? It requires both wise use of the mind and the support of sound mechanisms. Buddhism provides us with such a framework.

A couple of years ago, I gave a talk titled “Unlocking Mindfulness and Universal Compassion,” which involves two key qualities: benefiting both oneself and others. If we wish to benefit ourselves and move toward awakening, we must cultivate mindfulness; without it, we cannot reveal our awakening nature. If we wish to benefit others and help sentient beings, we must cultivate compassion; doing a few good deeds is not enough. In terms of personal growth and character development, Buddhism guides us to build our practice within, not merely through external moral constraints. Otherwise, we may lack the inner drive for transformation.

Classical Chinese learning encompasses the teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, each offering complementary insights. As inheritors of these teachings, we must engage in its study to reconnect with our cultural roots, enrich our inner lives, and give rise to spiritual aspiration. In doing so, we also develop the inner qualities needed to serve society effectively.

# IV

## RETURNING TO SIMPLICITY WITH THE WISDOM OF CHAN

The *Surangama Sutra* teaches: “All living beings, from the time without beginning, have mistaken themselves by clinging to external objects, thereby losing their true minds and being turned round by objects.” In the restless pursuit of external gains, we keep forging ahead—only to lose ourselves along the way. A Western proverb echoes this insight, gently advising us to “wait for the soul to catch up with the body.” This cross-cultural resonance leads us to ask: in a world overwhelmed by material desires, how can we remain anchored in our true mind and preserve its inner autonomy? In response

to this question, Western humanistic thought has begun to draw upon Eastern wisdom. It reflects on the crises brought about by modern civilization and seeks a balance between instrumental rationality and value rationality. Meanwhile, deeply inspired by Chan, minimalist aesthetics aims to simplify space, objects, and lifestyle, allowing us to return to the genuine needs of the mind.

We are now living in the Degenerate Age of Dharma. What does that mean? The so-called “degeneration” does not mean that the Dharma is no longer present. In fact, when it comes to studying Buddhist teachings, people can read sutras and look up texts far more easily than before. With a few clicks, we can access countless sutras and listen to virtuous teachers explaining the Dharma. Such ease would have been unimaginable in the past. Yet, despite all this convenience, practice has not become easier. In many ways, it has become even more difficult than before. This is because modern society is filled with temptations, and the external environment is full of distractions, making it hard for our mind to settle.



How can we maintain inner autonomy in a restless world? The answer lies in carrying forward the wisdom of Chan. In traditional Chinese culture, Buddhism, along with Confucianism and Daoism, has played an irreplaceable role in shaping how people perceive the world and establish their spiritual aspirations. Among the three, Confucianism advocates active engagement with society. Yet, amid the ever-changing tides of official life, it is especially important to preserve a mind of transcendence; otherwise, one can easily be shaken by success and failure. This is where the Dharma offers essential guidance. Through its wisdom, we learn to face life's uncertainties with composure, knowing when to step forward with diligence and when to step back with equanimity.

For this reason, Buddhist classics such as the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Heart Sutra*, the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, and the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* have long been essential readings for Chinese literati. Su Dongpo, a renowned Song dynasty poet, is a classic example of someone who embraced both Confucian and Buddhist

paths. Though his official career was full of setbacks, he still lived a life rich in flavor and meaning. Su Dongpo had close connections with Chan practitioners and practiced Chan meditation himself. Drawing on the wisdom of the Dharma, he was able to maintain a calm and steady mind throughout life's many ups and downs. This spirit remains deeply relevant today. For modern people, the wisdom of Chan offers support in the following ways:

### 1. Discovering the True Self

In Chan Buddhism, there is a classic *huaou*—a contemplative question—that asks: “What was my original face before my parents gave birth to me?” This is a profound inquiry into the question: Who am I? What truly represents the “self”? If we believe that youth and beauty define who we are, then we are building our identity on what inevitably fades. If we see wealth as a reflection of the “self,” we must realize that we are born with nothing and take nothing with us when we die. If we regard the body as the self, we must remember that, in just a few decades,

it will return to ashes.

The *Surangama Sutra* teaches, “That which is dependent arising is not your true self; that which is not arising from conditions is not your true self, then what is your true self?” Since the “self” represents the very essence of life, the search for the truth of life—who we truly are—involves continuously seeing through our attachments to possessions. Whatever arises through dependent conditions is not the true self, but merely an identity label imposed by ourselves or society. Only by seeing through these conditioned phenomena can we uncover what is truly unconditioned—our original nature.

Chan helps us see through false identities and directly reach the very essence of who we are.

## 2. Returning to a Simple Life

Why do we need so many things in our lives? In fact, many of these are not true necessities but cravings created

by the mind. Today, people feel that they cannot live without their phones, computers, or cars. However, these things did not exist in ancient times. Even thirty years ago, they were not common. Back then, we simply did not know these needs existed, yet life was still fulfilling.

It shows that what we believe we need is actually shaped by the desires of the mind. The wisdom of Chan helps us let go of imagined needs and rediscover the abundance that already dwells within. Life is complete as it is. When the mind rests in contentment and ceases to create unnecessary desires, we realize that nothing is truly missing. Chan practitioners live simple and humble lives. Since their minds are unburdened by worldly worries, every moment becomes its own perfect season. In that clarity, they naturally delight in spring blossoms, autumn moonlight, summer breezes, and winter snow—each revealing its tranquil beauty.

Many of our lay practitioners used to care a lot about trendy clothes and luxury handbags. But after studying

the Dharma, most now dress more simply, often spending just around a hundred yuan. In the past, they might have worried, “What will others think if I dress like this?” and spent time every day choosing what to wear. But now, these concerns no longer bother them. This is because the focus of their lives has shifted, and so have their needs. Indeed, when we stop creating needs, they simply disappear.

### **3. Return to the Original Mind and Heal from Within**

For quite a while, the term “being a slave to” something has been popular, such as being a slave to phones or video games. This means losing control over ourselves, which can be applied to shopping habits. Many people shop impulsively and without restraint, trying to relieve stress or as a form of emotional compensation—feeling that after working hard, buying something is a way to reward themselves. If we do not consciously examine and manage these impulses, we may easily fall into a repetitive cycle: work, shop, work, and shop again, over and over.

The reason life remains trapped in *samsara* is because we constantly chase after external things, without understanding what life truly needs. Especially in today's world, from manufacturers to merchants, and from platforms to influencers, everyone is working relentlessly to create temptations and fuel ever-growing desires. This leaves people increasingly powerless against their impulses, making it ever harder to regain control.

The most important role of Chan meditation is to help us unlock our inner awareness and return to our original mind. This enables us to awaken and live with autonomy. The mind has the capacity to generate suffering, but it also holds the innate ability to heal and liberate itself. Cultivating awareness allows us to access this healing potential, freeing ourselves from mental afflictions.

#### **4. Let the Mind be Autonomous**

Our mind inherently possesses the capacity of autonomy—this ability is called awareness. In our structured

approach to mindfulness meditation, the beginner level focuses on cultivating concentration while unlocking awareness. The intermediate level expands this awareness, enabling us to remain mindful throughout daily life. Through this awareness, all thoughts and mental images are recognized and resolved, preventing the mind from being swept away by thoughts and habits. The advanced level is based on the right view of emptiness, which frees the mind from dualistic attachments. These capacities already exist within our minds, but they must be awakened through meditation. Therefore, mindfulness and awareness are effective methods for remaining autonomous amid the overwhelming tide of material desires.

At the Meditation Hall of the Amrita Retreat Center, there is a plaque inscribed with the phrase “Original Face.” What is our “Original Face”? Nowadays, many people live according to false identities and become deeply attached to them. Wherever there is attachment, there is also the fear of loss, which leads to a sense of uncertainty.

The wisdom of Chan helps us return to our true nature. If we realize that we are already complete and self-sufficient, would we still fear losing anything? Or would we fail to regain our inner autonomy while seeking reliance on external things?

## 5. Building a Mindful Lifestyle

The Chan-inspired lifestyle we are cultivating is centered on the mind. Many people speak of “everyday Chan” and “Chan and tea in unity,” but these ideas often remain at the level of mere rhetoric. So how can we truly integrate Chan into daily life? How does walking become a practice of Chan? How does eating, or drinking tea, become a part of Chan?

To achieve these, we have developed various programs to help people establish a proper way of engaging the mind, bringing Chan into walking, eating, and drinking tea. For instance, when walking, each step should be taken with awareness, bringing the mind fully back to the present



moment. Whether eating, drinking tea, or engaging in any daily activity—walking, standing, sitting, or lying down—we should always stay mindful at all times and in every place. When anchored in the present and staying aware, we can break free from material desires. Thus, we are no longer trapped in what Western philosopher Max Weber called the “iron cage of reason,” that is, a rational system built by commercial society.

We often forget what we already have and keep chasing what we don't have, resulting in endless busyness. Today, it is especially important to carry forward the wisdom of Chan and cultivate a life centered on the mind. To promote the application of Chan in modern life, we have launched the “Chan-inspired Living” program. This involves redesigning living spaces, daily objects, and lifestyle. The Amrita Retreat Center fully embodies this Chan-inspired lifestyle that settles our body and mind.

# V

## SETTLING THE BODY AND MIND FOR MODERN PEOPLE

Eastern Mindful Peace Culture Research Institute has developed a variety of programs. These include wellness practices like the Tai Chi Mindfulness Ball, Baduanjin exercises, acupressure massage, and “Wholistic Healthy Circulation,” as well as lifestyle programs such as vegetarian cuisine, Dhyana tea, and Shanti coffee. All of these are thoughtfully tailored to meet the real needs of modern people, so they quickly gained popularity. These are existing strengths we can build upon. There is no need to reinvent them, only to apply them effectively. We hope everyone will sincerely commit to learning. This is also a

skillful means for applying classical Chinese wisdom in everyday life and for practicing the bodhisattva path. As the Association for the Application of Classical Chinese Culture, we should take a project-centered approach: creating favorable conditions and nurturing more capable project leaders from the headquarters to each branch. Through these efforts, we can better serve society.

### **1. Carrying Forward Chinese Classics and Cultivating a Chan-Inspired Lifestyle**

Many local governments now focus on community development and have provided various venues for such initiatives. But to truly benefit the general public, meaningful content is essential. Our programs are designed, first, to support physical and mental well-being; then, to cultivate a quality Chan-inspired life; and ultimately, to guide people toward awakening. The first two aspects are non-religious and therefore well-suited to benefit the public and form good connections. In recent years, we have brought these programs to exhibitions, schools,

enterprises, and associations both in China and abroad. They have been warmly received wherever we go.

Recently, New Era University College in Malaysia established the “Eastern Mindful Peace Culture Research Center” in partnership with us, offering master’s and doctoral studies. Clearly, serving society through the transmission of Eastern wisdom has become a pressing need of our time, both in China and around the world. Therefore, we encourage everyone to embark on this global journey, passing on the light of Eastern wisdom and allowing the richness of traditional Chinese culture to reach the world and benefit all of humanity. A country’s global standing depends not only on economic power, but even more on the enduring influence of its cultural heritage. That’s why the government has put forward the vision of strengthening the nation through culture.

Since last year, dozens of Mindful Peace Yard and Mindful Peace Academy have been established across North

America, Europe, Oceania, Asia, and Africa. With such strong momentum, we hope more people will take part in this endeavor. There are two main ways to engage in this global outreach. One is through project-based support, by participating as part of an established project team. The other is to take independent initiative, organizing a new group and establishing a Mindful Peace Yard or Mindful Peace Academy in a new city. Through Mindful Peace programs, we can serve overseas Chinese communities and gradually introduce the unique depth of mindful peace culture to people around the world.

In 2024, we participated in Milan Design Week and hosted Dhyana Tea Ceremonies throughout the seven-day event. Around eighty to ninety percent of the participants were native Italians. Currently, we are holding tea ceremonies in cities such as London, Paris, New York, Melbourne, Auckland, and so on. On one hand, these tea ceremonies beautifully showcase Eastern aesthetics and traditional culture, offering an experience of tranquil elegance. Meanwhile, they serve as skillful means to calm

and settle the mind, which is something modern people deeply need in today's restless world.

## **2. Promoting Dhyana Tea Space, Building Harmonious Families**

At the same time, we hope the Association for the Application of Classical Chinese Culture will help promote the Dhyana Tea Space. Confucianism speaks of “harmonizing the family,” which means nurturing healthy and respectful family relationships. Traditional Chinese culture places great importance on the family as a fundamental unit. However, in today's society, many families lack a sense of cultural inheritance and connection. People tend to live within their own sense of self, and as a result, family members are becoming increasingly distant from one another.

By setting up Dhyana Tea Space at home, family members can come together to enjoy Dhyana Tea and study classical texts from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—such

as the *Analects*, the *Great Learning*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, the *Book of Lao Tzu*, and the *Mindful Peace Academy Collections*. Beyond the family, everyone has classmates, colleagues, relatives, and friends. If we regularly host tea ceremonies and invite them to join in reading, practicing Tai Chi Mindfulness Ball, or simply sharing a vegetarian meal, we can create a warm and welcoming space that will surely be appreciated. In doing so, we naturally cultivate a wholesome cultural climate. Unlike connections based on profit or personal interest, these gatherings are grounded in shared cultural learning and inner development. These relationships are deeply meaningful, which is a refreshing presence in today's society.

Let us work together to carry forward traditional culture, empowering more people to cultivate themselves and harmonize their families, thereby contributing to social stability and global peace.