

From Almsgiving to Devotion: A Study on the Structure and Function of the Relationship Between Buddhist Monks and Lay Believers

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Abstract: From the perspective of “from almsgiving to devotion,” this paper explores the structural forms and functional operations of the interactive mechanisms between the Buddhist sangha and lay believers. It argues that almsgiving and devotion constitute the core elements of the material and spiritual exchange within the monk-lay relationship, and that this exchange is accompanied by complex tensions involving authority, trust, institutional frameworks, and agency. The article elucidates the religious implications of almsgiving and devotion, examines the structural characteristics of the monk-lay relationship in terms of institutional arrangements, role division, and the mediating role of lay masters, and analyzes its functional mechanisms across economic, social, ideological, and spiritual dimensions. Through an examination of typical case studies from different historical periods, it reveals the bridging and connecting role played by lay masters in the monk-lay relationship at various stages. Finally, from the perspective of modern Humanistic Buddhism, the study reflects on the transformation pathways of the monk-lay relationship and new models of lay participation, offering valuable insights for the theoretical construction and practical exploration of contemporary Buddhist monk-lay relations. The research indicates that, as a crucial link for the survival and propagation of Buddhism, the monk-lay relationship requires a dynamic balance between tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Support; Devotion; Monk-Lay Relationship; Venerable Lay Practitioners; Humanistic Buddhism

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1. Introduction

Throughout the long history of Buddhism, the interactive relationship between the monastic community and lay followers has always been the fundamental mechanism through which the Dharma functions in the world. In their pursuit of liberation and the propagation of the Dharma, monastics must rely on the material support, social support, and psychological sustenance provided by lay devotees; conversely, through their offerings to the monastic community, devotees hope to gain spiritual belonging, nourishment of faith, and spiritual redemption through the influence of the teachings,

the power of the Buddha, and the precepts. This relationship, which evolves from “offering” to “faith,” is not merely a two-way exchange of material and spiritual resources; it is also fraught with complex tensions involving authority, trust, institutional structures, and social mobilization. Applying this perspective to the context of modern Humanistic Buddhism reveals the value of the role transformation and theoretical reconstruction of lay practitioners and the broader lay community in this new phase.

The significance of “offering” in Buddhism extends far beyond mere material giving. Numerous discourses in the scriptures have long elevated it to a means of cultivating merit and creating karmic conditions: laypeople cultivate merit and accumulate virtue through giving, while monks, by receiving offerings, are able to dwell in stability, practice, and propagate the Dharma. On the other hand, “conversion” represents the awakening of believers’ inner faith and the establishment of their agency: they transform from mere supporters into inheritors of the Dharma, bearers of obligations, and integral parts of the network of spiritual guidance. Throughout history, these two elements have been mutually interdependent, forming the core structural dimensions of the relationship between the monastic community and the laity.

Relying solely on early or traditional mechanisms of support makes it difficult to address the new challenges of propagating Buddhism under modern social conditions. Throughout the development of Chinese Buddhism—from the establishment of the temple system during the Sui and Tang dynasties, to the rise of the “Endless Treasury” (a system that centralized offerings from devout believers and revenues from temple lands in monastery storerooms) during the Song and Yuan dynasties,^[1] to the standardization of Buddhist organizations and innovations in lay participation mechanisms in modern times, all indicate that the forms of support and the structure of monastic-lay relationships are constantly evolving.^[2] In this transformation, lay practitioners typically occupy a pivotal position: they serve not only as a vital source of resources but also as a bridge for the propagation of the Dharma, social education, and institutional development.

At the same time, the theme of “from almsgiving to devotion” also pertains to the evolution of the laity’s agency. When lay practitioners transition from being mere providers of material resources to becoming “partners in the Dharma”—possessing a commitment to spiritual guidance, the capacity for institutional co-creation, and the ability to engage in theoretical discourse—the relationship between the monastic community and the laity ceases to be a one-way model of superior-subordinate or giver-receiver dynamics. Instead, it manifests as a new relationship characterized by collaboration, participation, and shared governance. This new relationship must both uphold the authority and stability of the monastic community while respecting the agency and innovative spirit of the laity (especially distinguished lay practitioners). This tension and balance constitute the key issues that modern Humanistic Buddhism urgently needs to reflect upon and reconstruct.

Based on the above examination, this paper intends to take “From Offering to Devotion” as its entry point to explore the structural forms and functional mechanisms of the Buddhist monastic-lay relationship, with a focus on highlighting the status and practical role of distinguished lay practitioners as intermediary nodes. From a historical and archaeological perspective, it will systematically analyze the offering-to-devotion

mechanisms across different historical phases; from the perspectives of institutional structure and functional dynamics, we will examine the role of the monk-lay relationship in economic, social, religious, and ideological spheres; and finally, from the perspective of modern Humanistic Buddhism, we will reflect on the pathways of transformation and contemporary significance of this relationship. It is hoped that through such an inquiry, we can not only offer new insights into the theory of monk-lay relationships but also provide guidance and inspiration for defining the role of lay practitioners and building a system of lay believers within the context of Humanistic Buddhism.

2. The Religious Implications of Offerings and Devotion

Within the Buddhist tradition, offerings and devotion are not mutually exclusive; rather, they constitute the most fundamental religious framework underpinning the relationship between the monastic community and the laity. By examining these two elements, we can gain insight into how lay followers transform external material support into internal religious identity, and uncover the mechanisms through which the monastic community utilizes the relationship of “being supported” to propagate the Dharma and maintain its social influence. Throughout history, the dynamic between almsgiving and devotion has been continually reshaped, and its religious significance has gradually deepened and expanded.

The term “offering” has a remarkably broad scope of usage in Buddhist scriptures. In early Buddhist texts, offerings typically referred to the support provided by laypeople to the monastic community or individual monks in six areas: clothing, food, shelter, transportation, medical care, and utensils (that is, the so-called “four kinds of offerings” plus other necessities). This support is both material and a religious act: through it, the donor expresses reverence for the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha), accumulates merit and karmic conditions, and establishes a spiritual bond with the Buddhist community. It is evident, therefore, that offerings are not merely secular charity or social assistance, but inherently carry implications of religious causality: devotees’ acts of giving anticipate a form of reward transcending the mundane—whether in the form of blessings in this life or the virtuous fruits of spiritual refuge in future lives. The scriptures also emphasize that the purification of the three karmas—body, speech, and mind—constitutes the highest form of “Dharma offering.” This suggests that offerings should not be limited to material goods but should be elevated to an “inner manifestation” of the devotee’s practice (that is, dedicating Buddhist actions of body, speech, and mind as offerings to the Triple Gem)^[3].

From a historical perspective, the form of the offering mechanism has exhibited numerous variations across different regions and stages of Buddhism. During the period of Indian Buddhism, monastic communities relied on alms-seeking and wandering from place to place, primarily depending on the daily offerings of lay devotees; monasteries still maintained a relatively loose organizational structure in their early stages, and the system of offerings had not yet been fully institutionalized. As Buddhism spread to China and gained widespread recognition at both the state and societal levels, the structures of temples and monastic communities became increasingly established, and a system of monastic economy began to take shape. By this time, almsgiving was no longer limited to daily begging but had been integrated into institutional mechanisms

such as land ownership, temple assets, donations, imperial grants, and treasury management. Taking the Northern and Southern Dynasties and the Sui and Tang Dynasties as examples, imperial grants of land, rice, and silk, along with the monk household system, became part of the economic foundation of monasteries, expanding the scale and forms of lay support^[4]. During this phase, offerings became an integral part of monastic institutions and social structures, and laypeople's support for the monastic community was no longer merely scattered and sporadic but increasingly intertwined with local communities, powerful figures, the imperial court, and diverse networks of interests.

Turning to the concept of "conversion," it emphasizes the transformation of laypeople's identity from mere material supporters to subjects of faith. Conversion is not merely a formal act of taking refuge in the Three Jewels; it is a process of turning one's heart toward the Dharma, accepting its teachings, willingly transforming oneself through the Dharma, and integrating into the Buddhist community. When devotees, through their acts of support, gradually develop faith and understanding, are willing to engage in deep practice, accept the discipline of the precepts, and assume responsibilities within the sangha, they may be regarded as having transitioned from supporters to converts. Conversion also implies the subjectivity of faith—devotees are no longer merely passive providers but become participants in the educational system and bearers of doctrinal transmission. In a sense, conversion represents a spiritual return flow within the relationship of offerings: the devotees' material contributions receive a response in terms of Dharma principles, the level of faith, or social identity. They are no longer merely "objects" but become part of the monastic community's educational network.

The relationship between patronage and conversion is not a simple linear progression but rather a complex pattern of tension, interaction, and feedback. This dual tension between the material and the spiritual, the economic and the faith-based, constitutes the core dynamic of the monk-lay relationship at the level of religious mechanisms. From the perspective of almsgiving, laypeople support the monastic community with material resources; however, if this support does not incorporate the layperson's active participation in faith and understanding of the Dharma, it may remain at the level of "external behavior," making it difficult to deepen their commitment to the faith. Conversely, when devotees internally embrace the teachings and are willing to assume responsibilities within the Buddhist tradition, the deepening of their faith can transform material support from mere giving into meaningful religious interaction. In other words, if support fails to inspire devotion, it risks becoming mere secular charity; if devotion lacks the support of material contributions, the monastic community struggles to sustain its lineage. The two are mutually reinforcing, forming a cyclical path of support—devotion—and renewed support.

Within this interactive cycle, the common basic pattern can be summarized as follows: First, devotees establish a connection with the monastic community through offerings; second, through contact with monks, listening to the Dharma, and participating in Dharma assemblies, devotees gradually develop faith, understanding, and identification with the Dharma; third, most devotees may stop at making offerings and listening to the Dharma; fourth, a small number of devotees deepen their

commitment to become true believers, willing to take on deeper responsibilities in spreading the Dharma, such as protecting the Dharma, assisting teachers, and propagating the teachings; fifth, after becoming true believers, their offerings tend to be more conscious, selective, and informed by an understanding of the teachings. This transition from quantity to quality represents a functional upgrade within the structure of the relationship between the monastic community and the lay faithful.

Historically, many eminent lay practitioners have served as exemplary figures who evolved from donors into devotees and even “co-workers in the Dharma.” They supported the Dharma financially, participated in the affairs of Buddhist organizations, and engaged in theoretical interpretation and doctrinal construction. Through such transformation, they transformed the monk-lay relationship from a simple hierarchical relationship of giving and receiving into a communal relationship of co-constructing the Dharma and sharing responsibility. In recent years, within the context of modern Humanistic Buddhism, lay practitioners of great virtue are increasingly expected to serve as new torchbearers and bridges within the Buddhist community; their path of growth can also be viewed as an extension of the offering-to-devotion mechanism.

Offering and devotion hold profound religious significance within the Buddhist monastic-lay relationship. Offering embodies the lay practitioner’s respect for the Three Jewels, as well as the practice of establishing faith, aspiration, and karmic affinity; conversion, meanwhile, signifies the establishment of the subjectivity of faith and represents an internal shift from acts of support toward active participation in the Dharma. The dual interaction between the material and the spiritual, as well as between the economic and the religious, not only forms the framework of the monk-lay relationship but also reflects the dynamic tension within Buddhism as a religious community throughout its historical evolution. In future discussions regarding the structure and function of the monk-lay relationship, these two dimensions must be closely juxtaposed, with particular attention paid to the mediating role of lay practitioners in this transformative mechanism.

3. The Structure of the Monastic-Lay Relationship

Within the Buddhist monastic-lay system, an examination of its structural dimensions concerns not only the roles and interactions of both parties but also how institutional mechanisms have shaped and solidified this relationship throughout history. Without examining the structural level to understand the institutional arrangements, social hierarchies, and discursive mechanisms among the Sangha, lay followers, and distinguished lay practitioners, it is difficult to explain why the mechanism of “transition from offering to devotion” has taken diverse forms across different historical periods. Structure is not a cold, rigid form but rather a network that supports the Dharma, authority, and social order. The following discussion will explore this through three key aspects: division of roles, intermediary nodes, and institutional arrangements.

In terms of structural configuration, the functional division between the Sangha and the lay community is grounded in both doctrinal principles and practical feasibility. Ordained monks, by virtue of their dedicated status, undertake responsibilities such as spiritual cultivation, the study of precepts, the transmission of the Dharma, propagation, and the formulation of monastic rules; they constitute the core strength of the monastic

community. Laypeople, within their secular identities, fulfill functions such as protection, support, participation in Dharma assemblies, financial contributions, and outreach. This division of labor is not a simple hierarchical opposition but rather reflects a complementary relationship: laypeople provide the monastic community with necessary material and social resources, enabling the community to take root in the world, propagate the Dharma, and establish internal order. Without material support from laypeople, the monastic community would struggle to survive; without the monastic community's authoritative guidance, the faith of laypeople might lack a stable foundation. It is precisely within this structure of mutual dependence and coexistence that the relationship between the monastic community and the laity can continue to evolve and develop.

Within this fundamental structure, lay practitioners fully demonstrate their role as intermediary nodes: on the one hand, they represent the lay community in exercising responsibilities such as mobilizing resources for the monastic community, participating in decision-making, disseminating culture, and organizing public engagement; on the other hand, they also undertake responsibilities such as conveying societal aspirations to the monastic community, communicating doctrinal principles to the lay community, driving institutional reform, and serving as guardians of the Dharma. Because lay practitioners possess certain advantages in terms of social resources, cultural literacy, and depth of faith, they are often entrusted with the role of representing the lay community. In major monastic projects, temple governance, charitable organizations, propagation efforts, and even doctrinal interpretation, they form a collaborative partnership with the monastic community. This intermediary role is not an external appendage within the monastic-lay structure, but rather serves as a "lubricant" and "tension regulator" for the interaction between laypeople and the monastic community. In traditional society, many distinguished lay practitioners came from prominent backgrounds and were well-connected within secular networks. They were able to act as bridges between the monastic community and local gentry, political authorities, and laypeople, facilitating the more effective expansion of the Buddhist community's teachings through resource integration, social mobilization, and spiritual guidance. In modern Humanistic Buddhism, the mediating role of lay masters has become increasingly institutionalized—they participate in the governance of the monastic-lay structure through platforms such as Buddhist associations, charitable organizations, educational institutions, various Buddhist hall organizations, and councils, exercising functions including resource allocation, religious affairs coordination, lay mobilization, and cultural dissemination.

Institutional arrangements serve as the underlying framework that ensures the stable operation of the structure. Within the monastic-lay structure, the disciplinary system first establishes the boundaries of identity and conduct between the monastic community and the laity. The monastic vows of renunciation, abstention from worldly sustenance, non-engagement in profit-seeking activities, and adherence to monastic rules endow the monastic community with a mark of "purity" in society. This is precisely the crucial mechanism by which monks distinguish themselves from ordinary laypeople and earn respect and trust. Strict monastic discipline not only ensures internal order within the monastic community but also, at the structural level, fulfills laypeople's

expectations regarding the monks' conduct and ideology, thereby establishing a hierarchical distinction between the laity and the Sangha. Laypeople are not permitted to arbitrarily interfere in monastic affairs, while the monastic community must maintain boundaries of reverence, exemplary conduct, and self-governance; this sense of identity boundaries is a crucial element in sustaining structural stability.

At the same time, the system of offerings, as an institutionalized mechanism for resource allocation, serves as the material foundation upon which the monastic community relies for its survival and the propagation of the Dharma. Historically, monasteries gradually established mechanisms such as treasuries, temple properties, temple fields, endowment funds, lay merit societies, and the monastic household system to manage alms resources in an organized manner, thereby endowing the act of offering with predictability, institutionalization, and long-term sustainability. Laypeople's almsgiving was no longer merely a scattered and sporadic act but was absorbed, integrated, and allocated within a network of resource flow. Through arrangements such as treasury management, rental income from temple properties, endowment trusts, lay sponsorship projects, and merit-list systems, monasteries effectively institutionalized this interaction of support. This not only ensured a stable source of livelihood for the monastic community but also provided laypeople with clear guidelines for participating in the community's resource structure. Through these institutionalized arrangements, the monastic community gained greater stability and credibility on both social and religious levels.

Furthermore, the concept of almsgiving and the mechanisms for legitimizing its discourse are structural elements that cannot be overlooked. Buddhist scriptures emphasize that almsgiving is the root of merit and constitutes a form of cultivation through karmic conditions; Scriptures such as the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Treatise on the Ten Grounds* elevate "offering the Dharma" to the highest form of support, emphasizing that laypeople should offer the Three Jewels through the three karmas of body, speech, and mind. This ensures that acts of almsgiving receive voluntary support from the faithful (as noted on p. 278 of *The Complete Works of Master Hsing Yun*: laypeople offer the Three Jewels through the four powers of wealth, material goods, labor, and spiritual support, with particular emphasis on the "fourfold offering").^[5] Through doctrinal discourse, almsgiving is legitimized and sanctified, becoming a conscious act through which laypeople participate in the monastic-lay structure, rather than merely a charitable endeavor. This mechanism of almsgiving discourse encourages laypeople to engage long-term and strengthens their motivation to make offerings, thereby internalizing and standardizing institutionalized offerings.

By integrating the three aforementioned threads—role division, intermediary nodes, and institutional mechanisms—we can outline the overall structural framework of the monk-lay relationship: The monastic community bears the core responsibility for doctrine and practice, while laypeople shoulder the burden of protection and support. Lay practitioners and virtuous figures serve as key intermediaries within the structure, regulating the tension between monks and laypeople through their capacity for resource allocation, spiritual guidance, and institutional participation. Meanwhile, the disciplinary code, the system of support, and the discourse mechanism of almsgiving provide structural safeguards. This structure is not static but continuously adjusts its

internal proportions and forms of order throughout historical development. Only by understanding this structural dimension can we further explore how the monastic-lay relationship functions at the functional level and more accurately analyze the pathways of structural transformation within the context of modern Humanistic Buddhism.

4. The Functions of the Monk-Lay Relationship

Having outlined the “support-devotion” relationship structure, it is necessary to further examine its functional dimensions. In a context where history and reality intertwine, the functions of the monk-lay relationship are neither singular nor limited; rather, they are interwoven and mutually dependent across economic, social, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. Only by examining these functions can we understand why the “support-faith” mechanism has endured over time, and only then can we gain insight into how this mechanism is being transformed or reinvented within modern Humanistic Buddhism.

First, from an economic perspective, the monk-lay relationship constitutes a material support system that enables the monastic community to sustain its existence, propagate the Dharma, and expand. If ordained monks relied solely on alms-gathering or sporadic donations to maintain the scale of temples, cover daily expenses, disseminate the teachings, and fund infrastructure, such efforts would often prove unsustainable. Ancient monasteries integrated and distributed alms resources through institutionalized support mechanisms (such as temple estates, treasuries, rents from temple lands, endowment funds, lay patronage projects, and merit-list systems), providing the monastic community with a relatively stable economic foundation. In her research, He Rong points out that the economy of Buddhist monasteries must not only coexist with charitable relief but also balance self-sufficiency with social service functions. This dual role makes the monastery economy a crucial pillar of the “survival-development” logic of Buddhist organizations.^[6] Furthermore, from an institutional perspective, the “Zan Dan Yin” (monastic savings), support through ordination certificates, and revenues from temple lands constituted a significant proportion of monastic finances during the Tang Dynasty. This indicates that the ancient monastic community had long incorporated support mechanisms into its institutional arrangements to ensure a continuous inflow of material resources.^[7]

In the modern and contemporary contexts, the economic functions of the monastic community are particularly critical: it must not only sustain itself but also serve broader functions such as the propagation of the Dharma, education, and social services. Consequently, modern monasteries often establish budgets, fundraising departments, charitable foundations, lay donor contribution mechanisms, and annual reporting systems to institutionalize the collection, management, and utilization of resources from the lay community. This institutionalized economic function has enabled the monastic community to shift from a mode of “passively awaiting alms” to one of “active mobilization—resource allocation—sustainable management.” This is referred to in contemporary Buddhist circles as the “logic of legitimate economic action in Buddhism,” which bears some resemblance to the financial mechanisms of nonprofit organizations.^[8]

However, economic functions do not constitute the entirety of the relationship between the monastic community and the laity. Its social functions are equally significant in both historical and contemporary contexts. Through temples, Buddhist organizations, and lay networks, the interaction between monks and laypeople has

evolved into a social organizing force and a participant in public affairs. In the Chinese Buddhist tradition, temples have often served not only as religious sites but also as cultural centers, places of charity, educational institutions, disaster relief organizations, and venues for public deliberation within local communities. Buddhism has undertaken public functions in areas such as social ethical education, cultural transmission, and charitable services for the benefit of society. In his article, Deng Zimei points out that Chinese Buddhism has undertaken multiple social functions, including ethical education, compassionate relief, cultural exchange, and psychological comfort, and was an essential element in maintaining morality, culture, and people's livelihoods in ancient Chinese society.^[9] In his essay "Buddhism and Public Welfare," Master Hsing Yun also explicitly states that, in addition to engaging in charitable endeavors, Buddhism should assume the responsibility of "guiding society and purifying the human heart." Through public welfare activities, community service, family education, and youth counseling, Buddhism can become more deeply integrated into the social fabric.^[10]

In the operation of its social functions, the relationship between the monastic community and lay followers can mobilize the faithful to participate in public welfare, charity, and community development. This mechanism of collaboration between lay followers and the monastic community enables Buddhism to become a part of the social fabric. Through donations, volunteer participation, collaboration on charitable projects, and community outreach, lay followers engage in the monastic community's social initiatives. This ensures that the monastic community is not isolated within the religious sphere but becomes an important participant in social organizations. Furthermore, through lay networks, the monastic-lay relationship disseminates doctrinal values, the spirit of compassion, and social concern to broader social circles, thereby generating social influence.

The ideological function is one of the most central aspects of the monastic-lay relationship. The mechanisms of offerings and devotion are not merely a two-way exchange between material resources and faith; they also serve as a driving force for the propagation of the Dharma, the deepening of faith, and theoretical innovation. Through offerings, laypeople gain opportunities to engage with the monastic community, attend Dharma talks, seek guidance, and participate in Dharma assemblies, study sessions, and other activities, thereby gradually deepening their faith. The process of devotion signifies that laypeople become recipients, disseminators, and inheritors of the Dharma. In this sense, the ideological function of the monk-lay relationship manifests in three aspects: first, the propagation of the Dharma; second, the deepening of faith; third, doctrinal innovation. The former is realized through mechanisms such as Dharma discourses, religious assemblies, Buddhist colleges, and publishing; laypeople deepen their faith through reading, taking refuge, participation, and study; while eminent lay practitioners and dedicated devotees may engage in the interpretation, compilation, and innovation of Buddhist doctrines, or even establish new schools of thought or methods of propagation.

Looking back at Buddhist history, many lay followers and lay practitioners, after attaining the status of devoted adherents, participated in the elaboration of doctrines, the translation of scriptures, the establishment of academies, and the publication of Buddhist works—all of which exemplify this intellectual function. For instance, during

the Tang Dynasty, eminent lay practitioners often served as driving forces in the development of Buddhist thought and ritual systems; In modern times, many lay practitioners and devotees have participated in Buddhist colleges, research institutions, and magazines; served as editors of academic journals; and translated and authored specialized Buddhist texts—all of which demonstrate the proactive role of the lay community in intellectual matters. Within the modern Humanistic Buddhism movement, many lay practitioners and devotees have taken on full-time roles in Buddhist academic publishing, Dharma lectures, cultural dissemination, and the interpretation of modern Buddhist thought, thereby influencing the intellectual landscape of both the Buddhist community and society at large.

Furthermore, the relationship between the monastic community and lay followers is characterized by a spiritual dimension as a crucial component. While economic, social, and intellectual functions tend to focus on external mechanisms and societal aspects, the spiritual function pertains to the depths of faith and the construction of a community. Through the interaction of offerings and devotion, the monastic community and lay followers establish a bond of mutual dependence and support, fostering a sense of a faith-based community. Through offerings, laypeople cultivate a bond of faith with the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, while the monastic community reciprocates by propagating the Dharma, setting an example, and providing support, thereby establishing a relationship of spiritual reciprocity. Laypeople feel a sense of belonging and responsibility within the Buddhist community and the monastic order, while the monastic community, supported by the laity, recognizes its social responsibility and the status of being relied upon.

Within this spiritual dynamic, the relationship between laypeople and the monastic community transcends mere material exchange; it is the forging of a “spiritual covenant.” The laypeople’s devotion, aspirations for practice, fulfillment of vows, as well as their care and expectations for the monastic community, all cultivate reverence for the Dharma and a sense of belonging to the spiritual community on a spiritual level. Through participation in temple activities, Buddha worship, scripture recitation, offerings, prostration, and dedications, laypeople engage in both external interaction and internal spiritual cultivation and return. This interplay of action and faith elevates the bond between laypeople and the monastic community beyond mere daily support, entering the realm of “spiritual belonging and emotional reliance.”

This sense of spiritual community plays an irreplaceable role in the stability of faith, the loyalty of the faithful, and the cohesion of the monastic order. If the relationship between the monastic community and the faithful lacks the support of this spiritual function, then no matter how well-developed the system of offerings may be, how frequent the social activities, or how successful the dissemination of ideas, the relationship between the monastic community and the faithful may become fragile and instrumentalized. In other words, the spiritual function is the “core adhesive” that sustains the continuous and healthy operation of the relationship between the monastic community and the faithful.

Only by viewing these four functions as a mutually supportive and interpenetrating system can one fully understand the mechanism of the monk-lay relationship: the economic function provides resource security for the monastic community; the social

function integrates Buddhism into social mechanisms; the ideological function drives the dissemination and innovation of Buddhist teachings; and the spiritual function strengthens the bonds of faith and communal identity. All four are indispensable; none can be omitted. It is precisely because of these functions that the mechanism of almsgiving and devotion has remained ever-relevant throughout history and continues to be endowed with new forms and missions in the development of modern Humanistic Buddhism. In subsequent chapters, we will continue to explore these functions through historical examinations, analyses of the roles played by lay practitioners and eminent figures, and discussions on pathways for reconstructing modern monastic-lay mechanisms.

5. Eminent Lay Practitioners in History and the Relationship Between Monks and Lay Believers

In tracing the historical development of the relationship between monks and lay believers, the historical role of eminent lay practitioners is of indispensable significance. They served not only as pioneers within the lay community but also as bridges connecting the monastic order with society. Throughout various historical periods, they reshaped the internal dynamics of the monastic-lay relationship through offerings, the propagation of the Dharma, the protection of the Dharma, and intellectual contributions. By examining typical examples from the two major historical traditions of Indian and Chinese Buddhism, we can more clearly illustrate the patterns and significance of the role played by eminent lay practitioners in the monastic-lay relationship.

During the period of Indian Buddhism, several renowned lay practitioners had already emerged as benchmarks in the history of monastic-lay relations through their generous offerings, acts of protecting the Dharma, and spiritual awakening. Anāthapindika (known as “the Elder Anāthapindika”) is the most representative example among them. According to traditional Buddhist scriptures and the accounts of Buddhist historians, after hearing the Buddha’s teachings, Anāthapindika demonstrated unwavering faith in the Triple Gem. He purchased the Jeta Grove with his own wealth to provide a residence for the Buddha and the monastic community to dwell and propagate the Dharma, thereby becoming one of the Buddha’s most important lay supporters. This act not only reflected the lay devotee’s material support for the monastic community but also signified his spiritual identification with and devotion to the Dharma. As described in the Buddhist scriptures, he meticulously prepared the residence and respectfully invited the Buddha and the Sangha to receive his offerings, his reverence being evident to all. In particular, the *Chapter on Sudatta’s Monastery* explicitly records the elder’s acts of raising funds for offerings, respectfully welcoming the Sangha, and providing ritual implements, serving as an early manifestation of the mechanism linking offerings to faith.

Sudatta not only supported the Sangha financially but also served as a model in the propagation of the faith and the structuring of the relationship between the Sangha and lay followers. Through his acts of offering, he imbued the act of offering itself with Buddhist ideological significance and inspired other believers to follow his example. His actions were both a concrete manifestation of material support and an expression of faith imbued with doctrinal meaning; his interactions with the Buddha and the Sangha exemplified the reciprocal relationship between offering and devotion in a classic historical context. Within the context of Indian Buddhism, this exemplary act of almsgiving provided an early model for future interactions between lay followers and the monastic community, and established a precedent for the role of lay masters in social mechanisms and the transmission of Buddhist teachings.

Turning to the Chinese Buddhist tradition, the role of lay masters became more diverse and institutionalized. Since the introduction of Buddhism to China, the lay community has exerted widespread influence across cultural, political, economic, and artistic spheres. Among them, those with deep faith and high social standing occupied a crucial intermediary position in the

development of Buddhism. Take Bai Juyi as an example: this Tang Dynasty scholar and lay Buddhist, beyond his poetic works, literary influence, and political prestige, also demonstrated a clear commitment to supporting and propagating Buddhism. As pointed out in *The Complete Works of Master Hsing Yun*, the contributions of lay practitioners to the propagation of Buddhism and the rectification of culture cannot be overlooked. Their poetry and prose frequently feature Buddhist themes, and their social status lends their role as protectors of the Dharma even greater symbolic significance at the intersection of Buddhism and culture.^[11] As a quintessential lay Buddhist, Bai Juyi's literary prestige facilitated the entry of Buddhist teachings into the literati class and the networks of the gentry, thereby expanding the penetration of the Dharma into secular culture. As discussed in the article "Buddhism and the Literati," many literati took refuge in Buddhism and propagated the Dharma through poetry and prose; their contributions were even regarded as an indispensable part of the dissemination of Buddhist culture.

A more modern example is Yang Renshan, a lay Buddhist from the late Qing and early Republican periods, whose contributions to Buddhist endeavors and the restructuring of the relationship between monks and lay believers were particularly notable. Born into a gentry family, Yang Renshan possessed social resources and cultural sophistication, and he vigorously advocated for the revival of Buddhism within the Buddhist community. He founded the Jinling Scripture Carving Bureau, centering its work on the printing and carving of sutras to promote the circulation of Buddhist texts and ritual implements. This transformed the role of lay practitioners from mere patrons to active participants in the propagation of the Dharma, cultural construction, and institutional development. As research has noted, Yang Renshan's establishment of the Jinling Scripture Carving Bureau and its Buddhist Studies Society marked a turning point in the revival of modern Chinese Buddhism.^[12] He not only provided material support for Buddhist scholarship and the printing of Buddhist texts but also participated in the institutional structuring of the monastic-lay community, thereby institutionalizing and organizing the role of lay practitioners. His Buddhist endeavors were linked to mechanisms for lay participation and, through institutional platforms, strengthened the pathways of interaction between laypeople and the monastic community.

In these historical examples, we can observe the specific modes of action of eminent lay practitioners: First, in the dimension of offerings, eminent lay practitioners utilized their wealth, social status, or organizational capabilities to provide sustained, large-scale, and institutionalized material support to the monastic community; Sudatta's purchase of a garden for sustenance and Yang Renshan's investment in the carving of sutras are typical examples; Second, in the dimension of Dharma propagation, they often directly participated in the mechanisms of teaching dissemination by organizing religious assemblies, printing Buddhist texts, funding translations, and organizing Dharma lectures; Yang Renshan's sutra engraving project and the Buddhist Studies Research Society are examples of this. Third, in the dimension of Dharma protection, lay masters frequently served as liaisons for Buddhist resources, mobilizers of the faithful, defenders of policy interests, and negotiators of the sangha's external relations; They wielded significant influence within local, cultural, and political networks, thereby securing social prestige, resource support, and institutional space for the Buddhist community. Finally, in terms of intellectual contributions, lay masters frequently utilized their cultural cultivation and erudition to participate in doctrinal interpretation, Buddhist scholarship, and institutional restructuring; they might compose Buddhist works, edit Buddhist publications, initiate academic organizations, or even participate in the formulation of monastic governance regulations. Yang Renshan's career in Buddhist publishing exemplifies his participation, as a lay practitioner, in the construction of Buddhist culture and the expansion of intellectual networks.

Overall, the paradigms of lay practitioners during the Indian Buddhist period were concentrated on the initial path of almsgiving and devotion, representing early models of patronage; whereas in the Chinese Buddhist tradition, the roles of lay practitioners gradually

expanded in later periods toward institutionalization, cultural engagement, and governance, resulting in more complex and multifaceted modes of influence. Through these historical examinations, we come to understand that lay masters serve not only as intermediary nodes within the structure of monastic-lay relationships but also exert a formative influence on doctrinal institutions, lay communities, and cultural networks. In subsequent analyses of modern Humanistic Buddhism, we should further examine how these traditional models have been inherited, transformed, or innovated to address the practical challenges of reconstructing monastic-lay relationships under contemporary social conditions.

6. The Transformation of Monk-Lay Relations from the Perspective of Humanistic Buddhism

From the perspective of Humanistic Buddhism, the transformation of monk-lay relations is not merely a superficial renewal of forms, but rather a reconstruction of deep-seated structures, functions, and values. Modern society places new demands on religion: transparency, participation, public engagement, legitimacy, and cultural adaptability. Therefore, in the context of modern Humanistic Buddhism, the interaction between monks and laypeople must evolve from the traditional model of support and devotion to a modern model characterized by multi-directional participation, shared governance and benefits, and the mutual integration of teachings and practice. In the following sections, I will elaborate on this transformation through the following aspects: the transition of modern monk-lay interactions, the new roles of lay practitioners, the dynamics and coordination mechanisms between monks and laypeople, and future prospects.

Under the conditions of modern society, traditional patronage relationships can no longer fully sustain the monastic community's dharma propagation efforts. Modern monastic communities require more substantial and stable resource support to fulfill diverse functions such as education, culture, public service, international exchange, and Buddhist studies. Consequently, many monasteries and Buddhist organizations have established systematic support mechanisms for dharma propagation: project donations, lay patronage pledges, annual budgets, special-purpose funds, fundraising platforms, and financial transparency systems. Monasteries no longer simply wait for alms but proactively design educational programs, organize lay participation, and report results regularly, thereby integrating lay mobilization, resource allocation, and the propagation of the Dharma into a unified mechanism. This mechanism deepens the institutionalization, planning, and sustainability of the interaction between the monastic community and lay followers.

For example, within the International Buddha's Light Association system, lay followers are not merely passive recipients of Dharma instruction; they have the opportunity to become "lay Dharma teachers," participate in the propagation of Buddhism, and engage in temple administration. Furthermore, virtuous lay followers may be granted the right to deliver Dharma talks or participate in organizational decision-making—a development that embodies the trend toward equality in modern monk-lay interactions. As stated in *The Relationship Between Monks and Laypeople*, "Laypeople are the masters of Buddhism, while monastics are merely servants"—this is a new concept that fosters balanced respect in the monk-lay relationship within modern society.^[13] At the same time, Humanistic Buddhism advocates for the "convergence of monks and laypeople," holding that all believers—whether monastic or lay—should participate in the development of the Dharma and social service. This principle is increasingly being put into practice in Buddhist organizations across contemporary China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia.^[14]

In this process of transformation, the role of lay practitioners has also taken on new significance: they are no longer merely behind-the-scenes benefactors, but rather collaborators, stewards, and disseminators within the modern monastic-lay system. Lay practitioners are actively engaged in Buddhist education, Buddhist studies, public welfare projects, charitable endeavors, and cultural dissemination. Many lay practitioners support Buddhist colleges,

Buddhist publishing houses, Buddhist lecture halls, Buddhist literary publications, and the promotion of Buddhism in communities, serving as cultural and academic hubs. By leveraging their resources and networks in social, cultural, educational, and media spheres, they act as bridges connecting modern Buddhism with society. As noted in relevant studies, within the Humanistic Buddhism movement, the lay Buddhist community has demonstrated a strong commitment to educational endeavors, proactively establishing organizations and disseminating Buddhist teachings to form a network of spiritual guidance that complements that of monasteries^[15].

Furthermore, lay practitioners frequently take active roles in social welfare, charity, and community service. By organizing environmental protection, disaster relief, elder care, medical assistance, and cultural activities in local communities, they give concrete expression to Buddhism's social functions, making the principle that Buddhism "remains rooted in the human world" a reality. Through these social welfare initiatives, the interaction between monks and laypeople is no longer confined to the internal temple system but extends into urban communities, civil society, and the public sphere. This transformation means that the monk-lay relationship is no longer merely an interaction within the religious inner circle but extends outward to form a collaborative system of public service and social governance.

However, in this modern transformation, the monk-lay relationship inevitably faces tensions between authority and equality, as well as between tradition and modernity. Traditionally, monks have been regarded as guardians of the Dharma and exemplars of monastic discipline, possessing high symbolic authority; laypeople, meanwhile, have been accustomed to a position of respect, obedience, and support. Modern society, however, places greater emphasis on participation, equality, oversight, and transparency. If the emphasis on laypeople's equal participation is excessive, it may undermine the monastic community's discipline, the boundaries of the Dharma, and religious norms; if the traditional hierarchical system is rigidly upheld, it is prone to conflict with the expectations of the modern public. Amid this tension, reasonable mechanisms must be designed to achieve reconciliation. For example, lay representatives, boards of directors, supervisory boards, and project oversight committees could be incorporated into the governance structure of monasteries and religious organizations, granting laypeople a voice and oversight rights while simultaneously preserving the core decision-making authority of ordained monks regarding doctrine, ethics, and monastic discipline. Such a structural arrangement would help strike a balance between authority and equality.

The tension between tradition and modernity also exists in the realms of doctrine, ritual practices, organizational forms, and channels of dissemination. Religious communities must maintain the continuity of traditional elements such as precepts, scriptures, and rituals, while simultaneously aligning their organizational structures, methods of dissemination, and mechanisms of interaction with modern society. If they remain entirely confined to traditional forms, they will struggle to adapt to modern society; if they undergo excessive reform, they risk losing their religious distinctiveness. Consequently, many Humanistic Buddhism institutions adopt a strategy that integrates a "traditional core with modern mechanisms." For example, they preserve traditional monastic rituals and the practice of precepts while establishing institutional mechanisms such as financial transparency, lay participation, evaluation of educational programs, and online outreach. This compromise model allows modern monastic-lay relationships to retain religious distinctiveness while remaining socially adaptable.

Looking ahead, the relationship between monks and laypeople within the context of Humanistic Buddhism may evolve further in the following directions: First, the structure of interaction may become flatter and more collaborative. As laypeople's capabilities grow and digitalization advances, future monastic-lay relationships may no longer follow a distinct hierarchical structure but instead trend toward project-based collaboration, online cooperation, and shared governance of Buddhist teachings. Laypeople can participate directly in areas such as

project planning, cultural dissemination, community service, Buddhist education, and the expression of views on public religious issues. Second, the relationship between monks and laypeople may increasingly involve cross-domain, cross-media, and cross-cultural interactions. The advent of the digital age has made online Buddhist courses, virtual Dharma assemblies, Buddhist apps, and social media communities important venues for interaction. Laypeople can participate in Dharma practice, offerings, community engagement, and mutual aid networks within virtual spaces, thereby breaking geographical barriers and expanding the scope of religious outreach. Furthermore, the relationship between monks and laypeople may become more public-oriented and socially responsible. In the future, Buddhism may assume a greater role in spiritual care, community building, social welfare, advocacy for public morality, environmental protection, and mental health services. The monastic community and lay followers will not only interact within the faith system but will also become participants and promoters of social governance and cultural development. Through these functional expansions and structural reshaping, the relationship between monks and laypeople will gain new vitality in modern society.

Finally, the transformation of the relationship between the monastic community and the laity within the framework of Humanistic Buddhism is not merely a change in form but represents a reconstruction of values: a shift from “passive acceptance of faith” to “active participation in building faith,” and from “monastic-centered” to “interaction-centered” between the Dharma and the laity. Such a transformation requires the monastic community and the laity to establish a new covenant based on trust, transparency, responsibility, oversight, and a shared vision. This covenant should not be externally imposed but rather gradually emerge through doctrinal dialogue, institutional design, organizational consultation, and daily interactions. Only by constructing this new system of monastic-lay relations can Buddhism maintain its vitality in modern society, sustain the loyalty of its followers, establish public legitimacy within society, and better realize the ideal that “the Dharma is in the world, and the Buddha is in the world.”

7. Concluding Remarks

Throughout this text, the relationship between monks and lay followers—from material support to spiritual devotion—runs through both Buddhist history and contemporary practice. Material support and spiritual devotion are not separate entities, but rather a mutually dependent, cyclical, and reciprocal mechanism. Within the Buddhist community, lay followers provide material support to sustain the monastic order and facilitate the propagation of the Dharma, while the monastic order, in turn, nourishes the spiritual lives of lay followers through the teachings and precepts. As laypeople gain insight into Buddhist teachings and deepen their faith through acts of support, their identity shifts from that of external supporters to internal adherents. They then participate more actively in the affairs of the monastic community, thereby inspiring further support and patronage. This virtuous cycle forms a loop of “support—faith—renewed support,” serving as one of the fundamental driving forces behind the continuity of the Buddhist monastic community and the enduring presence of the Dharma.

An analysis at the structural level reveals that the stable functioning of the monastic-lay relationship relies on a clear division of roles and institutional support. On the one hand, ordained monks and nuns fulfill their fundamental duties through observing precepts, spiritual practice, and propagating the Dharma for the benefit of all beings, thereby establishing spiritual authority and moral exemplarity among the lay community. On the other hand, lay devotees assume the responsibility of support

through means such as the Four Offerings, providing the monastic community with resources and social networks at the secular level. Although their statuses differ, their functions are complementary and mutually reinforcing. Furthermore, disciplinary norms and monastic economic systems serve as structural safeguards: strict precepts maintain the monastic community's purity and prestige, earning the respect and trust of the lay community; while organized support mechanisms (such as the management of temple assets, the merit register system, and financial transparency) ensure the continuity and transparency of resource provision, thereby consolidating the institutional foundation of monastic-lay interaction. The role of lay practitioners as intermediary nodes is even more prominent: moving between the monastic and lay realms, they not only introduce secular resources and cultural influences into the Buddhist community but also disseminate the spirit of the Dharma to a broader society. By collaborating with the monastic community in areas such as temple governance, Dharma propagation projects, and public welfare and charity, they reconcile the tension between traditional monastic authority and modern lay participation.

An examination of functional dimensions further highlights the multifaceted value of the monk-lay relationship. First, in terms of economic function, lay offerings provide the material foundation for the monastic community's operations, ensuring a steady supply of funds and resources for Dharma propagation, education, and charitable endeavors. The positive interaction between monks and laypeople has also fostered a charitable economic network unique to Buddhism, achieving the goals of aiding the distressed and benefiting society. Second, in terms of social function, through lay participation, monasteries and Buddhist organizations have become vital platforms for disseminating ethical values and uniting community forces; Dharma assemblies, scriptural lectures, and volunteer activities combine personal cultivation with social service, embodying Buddhism's humanistic concern for "adornment of the land and the benefit of all sentient beings." Third, regarding ideological and cultural function, the relationship between the monastic community and laypeople serves as a bond for the transmission and innovation of the Dharma. Through offerings, devotees draw near to the Three Jewels, listen to the Dharma, and engage in study, thereby gaining wisdom and spreading the teachings; many lay practitioners also participate in the translation of scriptures, the writing of Buddhist works, and the publication of journals, ensuring that Buddhist thought is continuously expounded and enriched across different eras. Finally, from a spiritual perspective, the relationship between monks and devotees shapes a shared sense of religious belonging and spiritual refuge. Acts of support, infused with devout aspirations, are elevated into bonds of "Dharma affinity." Laypeople find inner peace and a sense of self-worth through their support of the Triple Gem, while the monastic community draws the motivation for propagation from the trust of the laity. It is precisely this mutual benefit, combining both material and spiritual dimensions, that elevates the relationship between monks and laypeople beyond a mere exchange of giving and receiving, transforming it into a cohesive bond within the religious community.

Historical examination reveals that lay practitioners of great virtue have played a pivotal role in facilitating the transformation from material support to spiritual devotion throughout the ages. As early as the time of the Buddha, the layman Sudatta spent his

entire fortune to purchase a garden and offer it to the Sangha, setting a model for the faithful in the practice of almsgiving. His story—of how external generosity evolved into inner devotion—has been passed down through the ages. Subsequently, throughout the history of Chinese Buddhism—whether it was the nobles and officials of the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties who generously donated funds to build monasteries, the literati of the Tang and Song dynasties who integrated Buddhist principles into their poetry and prose to advocate for the protection of the Dharma, or the lay practitioners of modern times who established scripture-printing houses and founded educational institutions to propagate the Dharma—all have demonstrated the trajectory of lay practitioners evolving from mere donors into collaborators in the propagation of the Dharma. By leveraging their social status, wealth, and intellect—whether through financial support for the Three Jewels, participation in administrative affairs, or the composition of works to propagate the Dharma—they have paved a broader path for the spread and development of Buddhism. The practices of these lay masters demonstrate that deep faith can unleash immense energy for the protection of the Dharma, enabling Buddhism to maintain vigorous vitality across diverse social contexts.

Looking toward the modern era, the rise of Humanistic Buddhism has infused the relationship between monks and laypeople with new vitality and challenges. Contemporary Buddhism, with the ideal of “propagating the Dharma in the human realm and building the Pure Land,” emphasizes collaborative cooperation between monks and laypeople. Many new Buddhist organizations have pioneered innovative models of monk-lay interaction: laypeople not only support monasteries with material offerings but also contribute their professional skills, time, and energy to the development of Dharma centers, propagation efforts, and charitable projects; monks, in turn, have transitioned from being mere teachers to organizational coordinators, working alongside laypeople to advance Buddhist endeavors. This transformation has shifted traditional monk-lay relationships toward a flatter, networked structure, granting laypeople a stronger sense of ownership and responsibility within the sangha. At the same time, traditional authority structures are undergoing adjustments. Monasteries are introducing measures such as board systems, lay representative participation in decision-making, and regular financial transparency to meet modern society’s demands for religious accountability and engagement. Of course, this modern transformation is not without its tensions: how to maintain the disciplinary authority of the monastic community while fully harnessing the initiative of the lay community has become a critical challenge facing the Buddhist community. The path to harmony lies in upholding core principles while embracing flexible innovation—maintaining the monastic community’s central role in doctrinal transmission and spiritual guidance, while acknowledging the unique contributions of laypeople, particularly lay elites, in resource mobilization, social service, and cultural dissemination, and organically integrating the two through institutionalized channels. Encouragingly, the practices of Humanistic Buddhism advocated by figures such as Master Hsing Yun and lay practitioner Zhao Puchu have already provided successful models: monks and laypeople together form a “Bodhisattva team” for the propagation of the Dharma, each fulfilling their respective roles while cooperating as equals, enabling Buddhism to

integrate more deeply into contemporary social life.

The perspective of “from material support to spiritual devotion” reveals the intrinsic cyclical dynamics and evolutionary logic of the relationship between monks and laypeople in Buddhism. The material support represented by offerings and the faith-based identification symbolized by devotion are mutually interdependent causes and conditions, jointly sustaining Buddhism’s vast religious ecosystem. Through this lens, it becomes evident that the relationship between monks and laypeople is not a static giver-receiver dynamic, but rather a cooperative and symbiotic community formed through long-term interaction. During this period of modern transformation, correctly understanding and applying this mechanism is particularly crucial for promoting the healthy development of Buddhism. On the one hand, Buddhist organizations should actively guide lay followers from superficial offerings toward deeper faith, enhancing the quality of their devotion so that every act of giving is transformed into a force for propagating the Dharma and benefiting sentient beings. On the other hand, they should create conditions for lay followers to participate more deeply in the affairs of the sangha, such as by strengthening lay education and training and improving participatory governance structures, enabling more capable lay practitioners to assume the responsibility of protecting the Dharma and benefiting the world. By moving with the times while respecting tradition, the relationship between monks and laypeople can certainly radiate new vitality in the new era, serving as a bridge connecting the pursuit of individual liberation with the practice of social welfare. It is hoped that the discussions in this study will provide new insights for the theoretical interpretation of the monk-lay relationship and offer valuable references for contemporary Buddhism in promoting reform within the sangha, enhancing cohesion, and strengthening its capacity for propagation.

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