

Hsing Yun's Humanistic Buddhism and Magda Arnold's Human Flourishing on the Good Life

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DOI: [10.17421/2498-9746-12-10](https://doi.org/10.17421/2498-9746-12-10)

SUBMITTED: 01.04.2026 – REVIEWED: 06.07.2026 – ACCEPTED: 28.07.2026

Abstract

This paper examines flourishing in Humanistic Buddhism—a contemporary Chinese Mahayana tradition advocated by Taixu (1890-1947). Taixu's "Life Buddhism" (*rensheng fojiao*) emphasized the accumulation of merit by deliberately shifting the focus away from traditional rituals and funerary rites. This tradition was further developed by Hsing Yun (1927-2023), a prominent figure in global Buddhism, who propagated "dharma joy" as a practical framework for human needs. The core tenets of Hsing Yun's philosophy involve Bodhisattva practice within everyday life, prioritizing social engagement and the cultivation of a joyful disposition. Utilizing Hsing Yun's framework, this study compares Humanistic Buddhist ideals with Magda Arnold's (1903-2002) psychological theories on flourishing, specifically her focus on meaningful life goals, motivational guidance, and the use of the self as an index for maturity. Ultimately, this paper puts into dialogue Hsing Yun's Humanistic Buddhist understanding of rebirth and Magda Arnold's Christian-Catholic framework of eternal communion with the Divine.

Keywords: Hsing Yun, Humanistic Buddhism, Magda Arnold, Human flourishing, Rebirth.

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1 THE GOOD LIFE

Philosophers from both the East and West have approached the pursuit of "the good life" in diverse ways. Often, the good life is equated with human flour-

ishing, making most theories synonymous with becoming a self-actualized individual. In the Eastern tradition, sages such as Confucius and the Buddha pursued this ideal through virtuous existence. Meanwhile, Western thinkers in the Aristotelico-Thomistic tradition focus on the individual's capacity to use reason to investigate the causes and principles of all things. Aristotle's *eudaimonia* exemplifies this pursuit, grounding the good life in reason and transcending mere pleasure. Contemporary thinkers, including the Buddhist Hsing Yun and psychologist Magda Arnold, share this focus on the virtuous life as the foundation of flourishing. Hsing Yun specifically emphasizes the cultivation of the "three acts of goodness" to ensure meaningful coexistence both in this life and in future rebirths. Arnold, meanwhile, considers happiness to go beyond hedonistic pleasure, making it more akin to Aristotle's *eudaimonia*.¹ Although these thinkers emerge from different traditions and backgrounds, they share a common starting point: the character and well-being of the individual. They explore how this refined sense of self gravitates toward, and ultimately radiates out to, the lives of others.

The following sections will examine Hsing Yun's Humanistic Buddhism, which cultivates the Three Acts of Goodness—doing good deeds, speaking good words, and thinking good thoughts—as the personification of the Bodhisattva ideal. It will further exemplify the teachings of the Four Givings (offering others hope, convenience, confidence, and joy) as essential components that make Humanistic Buddhism relevant today—a practice that moves "off the cushion" and beyond temple-centered mindfulness. Ultimately, these practices culminate in the Five Harmonies: individual (inner), family, interpersonal, social, and world harmony. Together, they foster a state of harmonious coexistence and co-prosperity, serving as the core of human flourishing in Hsing Yun's philosophy.

Meanwhile, Magda Arnold's framework for human flourishing is built upon four key pillars: the self-ideal, personality integration, emotional regulation, and maturity and fulfillment. For Arnold, flourishing is not merely a matter of feeling good but of living well. The self-ideal allows individuals to establish goals and strive toward a mental image of their best selves. Personality integration involves fulfilling human nature without abandoning the self to "the wild"; it suggests that recognizing our needs with moderation allows us to become better versions of ourselves. Emotional regulation involves managing latent tendencies so they support, rather than subvert, the development of character. Finally, maturity and fulfillment occur when one pursues valid strivings that result in a flourishing

¹Cf. F. RUIZ-FUSTER, A. BERNAL-MARTINEZ DE SORIA, M. ECHAVARRIA, *Emotional Regulation and Arnold's Self-Ideal: a Way to Flourishment*, «Frontiers in Psychology», 15/1425850 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1425850>.

character.

After examining Hsing Yun's tenets and Arnold's psychological model, I will analyze their divergences and convergences to identify parallelisms regarding the good life. I posit that despite their differing origins and orientations, Hsing Yun's Humanistic Buddhist ideals and Magda Arnold's Christian-Catholic framework may point to distinct ends—namely, rebirth versus eternal union with the Divine. In essence, however, both perspectives advocate compassion, loving-kindness, empathetic joy, and equanimity: universal values that transcend any single religion or tradition.

2 HSING YUN'S HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM

The Buddha's enlightenment, achieved over two thousand six hundred years ago, has flourished and remains vital today. While Buddhism is often associated with ritualistic devotion—such as prostrations and prayers—this traditional perception also encompasses physical and ceremonial elements like shrines, temples, the burning of incense, and the chanting of sutras. But in 2005, Schak and Hsiao writes that “in the last forty years, particularly in the last decade, there has been a remarkable growth of Buddhism in Taiwan.”² The key driver of this shift was the emergence of socially engaged Buddhist groups influenced by Taixu who taught “Life Buddhism or *rensheng fojiao*.” He deviated from traditional rituals, focusing instead on accumulating merit in this life by improving society. Taixu also advocated for the inclusion of the laity to help carry out Buddhist compassion, rather than relying solely on the Sangha, which was highly exclusive and cloistered at the time. Ultimately, Taixu opted for a more collaborative approach between monastics and lay devotees to effect positive social change. “The globalized propagation of Buddhism, humanitarian commitments, and academic investments of these organizations are considered not only the embodiment of Taixu's Renjian Buddhism, but also the Chinese expression of engaged Buddhism.”³

Hsing Yun, a student of Taixu followed the teachings of his mentor. He later founded Fo Guang Shan who is a major proponent of the modernization of Chinese Mahayana tradition that flourished over the past century. “Central to the movement is the concept of *renjian* Buddhism (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教) in Chinese, which literally means “Buddhism of the human realm” in English.”⁴ Although

²D. SCHAK, H. HSIAO, *Taiwan's Socially Engaged Buddhist Groups*, «China Perspectives», 59 (2005), pp. 43-55.

³J. ZHE, *Zhao Puchu and his Renjian Buddhism*, «The Eastern Buddhist Society», 44/2 (2013), pp. 35-58.

⁴J. RENKE, *Hsing Yun: A Global Ambassador for Chinese Buddhism*, in *Figures of Buddhist Diplomacy in Modern Asia*, ed. by J. Chia, <https://research.vu.nl/en/publications/hsing-yun-a-global-ambassador-for-chinese-buddhism/> Bloomsbury Academic, Singapore 2025, pp. 135-144.

members of the organization use the term Humanistic Buddhism, others frown upon the usage as it seems to mislead its meaning due to “wrong associations with the humanism of European intellectual history. One of the key tenets of European Humanism is, of course, its anti-clerical stance.”⁵ Hsing Yun’s Humanistic Buddhism aimed to build a *Pure Land* on Earth by focusing on practical teachings that emphasize universal virtues rather than forcing a strict new mindset.

2.1 *Three Acts of Goodness (TAG)*

Humanistic Buddhism strongly emphasizes familial harmony, and thus it promotes the *Three Acts of Goodness* (Do Good Deeds, Speak Good Words, and Think Good Thoughts).⁶ While this sounds simple, it requires making kindness a daily habit. These small acts serve as a foundation that improves our speech and, eventually, transforms the way we think. By practicing these three acts, we transform our character from the outside in:

1. Do Good Deeds (Action)
2. Speak Good Words (Speech)
3. Think Good Thoughts (Mind)

The consistency of TAG reminds us that habitual doing of little kind deeds can shape and motivate our character to becoming an overall good person. Just as Buddhism teaches us to do wholesome deeds (*Kusala*), TAG helps us to be morally upright individuals in this seemingly complex world. The complexity of existence emerging from the recent pandemic, ravaged by climate change issues, and now at the cusps of World War three, adopting TAG has never been more urgent.

For a clear grasp of TAG, the framework is shown below that will signify the necessity and impact of the practice, not just in Buddhist circles, not just within the religious mindset, but towards a general well-being of our shared consciousness and humanity.

2.2 *Four Givings*

Beyond the complex metaphysical layers of Buddhist thought lies a practical ethical framework designed for human flourishing. Hsing Yun’s “Four Givings” serve as a modern bridge to the ancient *Brahmaviharas*, or the Four Divine Immeasurables. The Four Divine Immeasurables are seen as states of the mind to abide in, an attitude of the mind which attaches primary importance to human beings

⁵This stands in stark contrast to the central role that monastics play within Hsing Yun’s organization, Fo Guang Shan. Yet, what all names have in common, is the emphasis on a socially engaged approach to Buddhism (cf. *ibidem*).

⁶S. HSING YUN, *Fundamental Tenets of Humanistic Buddhism*, «Studies on Humanistic Buddhism», 1 (2018), pp. 28-57.

Dimension	The Act	Focus	Impact
Physical	Do Good Deeds	Action	Cultivates helpfulness and service to others
Verbal	Speak Good Words	Speech	Promotes encouragement and truthful communication
Mental	Think Good Thoughts	Mind	Develops wisdom, compassion, and positive appraisal

Table 1 – The Three Acts of Goodness (Dimension, Focus, and Impact)

where it insists on the supreme necessity of the performance of sublime duties of loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity.⁷ By transitioning from internal meditation to external social action, Hsing Yun's Four Givings transform classical virtues of the *Four Divine Immeasurables* into tangible gifts of hope, convenience, joy, and confidence.

The following synthesis illustrates how these ancient virtues manifest in the practice of the Four Givings:

1. Loving-kindness (Metta) Giving Hope: Loving-kindness represents a genuine care for the "other." To offer hope is to demonstrate an active concern for a person's future and overall well-being.
2. Compassion (Karuna) Giving Convenience: Compassion is the impulse to alleviate the suffering or "plight" of others. In a practical sense, this translates to "giving convenience"—identifying the challenges others face and proactively assisting to ease their burden.
3. Empathetic Joy (Mudita) Giving Joy: This involves feeling authentic happiness for another person's achievements and jubilation. It is a selfless joy that transcends envy.
4. Equanimity (Upekkha) Giving Confidence: Equanimity is the cultivation of inner peace and serenity regardless of external circumstances. By maintaining steadfastness and a lack of insecurity, we "give confidence" to others. This creates a psychological space where others can flourish without fear of competition or diminishment.

The synthesis of the Four Givings and the *Brahmaviharas* demonstrates that spiritual practice is not a solitary endeavor. When we cultivate equanimity, we provide others the confidence to grow; when we embody compassion, we provide the convenience that eases their path. Ultimately, these teachings remind us that the highest form of personal virtue is found in how we empower and

⁷S. THAPA, *Chinese Origin of Humanistic Buddhism and Master Hsing Yun's Contribution in the Contemporary Humanistic Buddhist Movement in Taiwan*, «SSRN Electronic Journal», (2010), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1692238>.

Classical Virtue / States of Mind / Heavenly Abodes (Brahmaviharas)	Practical Application (Four Givings)	Core Objective
Loving-kindness (Metta)	Giving Hope	Nurturing the future and well-being of others
Compassion (Karuna)	Giving Convenience	Alleviating burdens and providing practical aid
Empathetic Joy (Mudita)	Giving Joy	Celebrating the success and happiness of others
Equanimity (Upekkha)	Giving Confidence	Providing a stable, non-competitive space for growth

Table 2 – Conceptual Comparison: *Brahmaviharas* vs. *The Four Givings*

uplift the world around us. “Among all the virtuous practices, there is nothing more important than giving others some positive conditions.”⁸ This is what human flourishing is all about, apart from the proposed mastery of the self, it should also include a harmonious co-existence with the other.

2.3 Five Harmonies

Hsing Yun’s Humanistic Buddhism is rooted in the original teachings of the Buddha and the immediate needs of humanity. By focusing on what is pure, beautiful, and virtuous, these teachings align with the Six Paramitas (the *Bodhisattva* ideal): *Generosity, Ethical Discipline, Patience, Diligence, Meditation, and Wisdom*

The Bodhisattva ideal denotes the virtue of generosity. Being naturally kind and giving, and always including the needs of others, helps us remain unselfish and wholesome. Ethical discipline implies a strong sense of control and an awareness of both ourselves and our surroundings as we aspire to live responsibly as rational agents. Patience balances our cognitive functions, allowing us to be more humane and compassionate toward others. Diligence means our sustained effort and zeal to carry out our respective tasks and duties. Meditation and wisdom are concentrations and disciplines of awareness that help us stay abreast of reality, maintaining a level-headed mind, body, and spirit. Together, these elements of the Bodhisattva ideal are known as the Six Perfections that an individual aspires to embody in our impermanent and corrupted world.

Cultivating these virtues fosters individual flourishing, sound character, and balanced judgment. This practice ultimately leads to what Hsing Yun calls as the Five Harmonies:

⁸S. HSING YUN, *The Essence of Humanistic Buddhism: BLIA World Headquarters General Conference Keynote Speeches (1992-2012)*, BLIA World Headquarters, Taipei 2012, pp. 147-167.

1. Inner Harmony through Joy
2. Family Harmony through Deference
3. Interpersonal Harmony through Respect
4. Social Harmony through Cooperation
5. World Harmony through Peace⁹

So, how must we understand and unpack the Five Harmonies?

As individuals, it is often the case that we move through life with cognitive dissonance. But must our everyday existence always be an arduous, uphill climb? Inner harmony through joy allows a person to face whatever challenges are at hand—not with resignation or defeat, but with an acceptance that transforms life's bitterness into an opportunity to become a better person.

Sometimes our families—our closest circles—are in the position to hurt us the most. While it is true that relationships within the family are not always ideal, deference allows us to navigate our dealings with family members with a level of respect and thoughtfulness that fosters harmonious coexistence.

Interpersonal harmony is the recognition and acceptance that many others are also struggling and trying to get by, just as I am. By being aware of our “being-with” others, we develop a sense of tolerance and respect, allowing space for each individual to grow and flourish.

Social harmony involves cultivating cooperation to bring about progressive change in our communities. Different sectors are composed of diverse people with different ways and means; and yet, there is a common goal: to cultivate compassion, assist those most in need, and help build better communities.

Finally, world harmony is the culmination of these internal and social practices, extending our sense of responsibility to the entire global community. It is the realization that in an interconnected and often fragile world, no individual or nation flourishes in isolation. By transcending parochial interests and embracing a oneness with all of humanity, we move toward a state of co-prosperity. This global harmony is not a passive absence of conflict, but an active, shared commitment to environmental stewardship, the protection of human dignity, and the cultivation of a peace that resonates across all borders. “Humanistic Buddhism is not about theoretical discussions behind closed doors, but emphasize the relationship between oneself and others, oneself and society.”¹⁰

⁹S. MIAO GUANG, *Interpreting the Humanistic in Renjian Fojiao (人間佛教) as Advocated by Venerable Master Hsing Yun of Fo Guang Shan*, «Studies on Humanistic Buddhism», 2 (2020), pp. 49–63.

¹⁰S. HSING YUN, *Lamp Transmission Record of Humanistic Buddhism by Venerable Master Hsing Yun*, ed. by Ven. M. Guang, Ven. J. Wei, Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, Kaohsiung 2026.

Level	Type of Harmony	Core Virtue
Individual	Inner Harmony	Joy
Home	Family Harmony	Deference
Community	Interpersonal Harmony	Respect
Society	Social Harmony	Cooperation
Global	World Harmony	Peace

Table 3 – The Five Harmonies of Humanistic Buddhism

3 MAGDA ARNOLD ON THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

Studies show that there is a strong connection on the appraisal of emotions and human flourishing that relates it to philosophy, psychology and education.¹¹ The idea that emotions are seen as a hindrance to logico-epistemic assertions have long been changed to the role and value of emotions to process and facilitate self-actualization. Magda Arnold is one of those proponents who believe that emotions does not hinder rather it plays an important part in becoming a self-realized individual. “Arnold’s notion of self-ideal allows us to understand how promoting emotional regulation in individuals serves as a means for them to achieve constructive life goals.”¹²

Arnold’s perspective is rooted in Aristotelian philosophy, where the human person is understood through the functions of a soul that is both rational and irrational. In this framework, emotions emerge from the irrational part of the soul; however, once an individual appraises these emotions to inform better judgment, they transcend mere impulse. It is the rational part of the soul that can properly direct actions toward the highest good.

For Aristotle, the ultimate aim of life is *the Good*, a state achieved not through a mechanical process, but through a *filtering* of experience—moving from mere sensory pleasure to the level of reason. Recognizing our biological roots in animality, Arnold suggests we must strive to elevate ourselves to this level of rationality. This process of filtering objects of experience initially appeals to the emotions; however, it is this very process—which Arnold calls appraisal—that motivates thoughts and actions to move beyond unruly impulses toward deliberate choices for the good.

Seen in this light, Arnold’s pillar of human flourishing involves a *Self-Ideal* where the individual is capable of purpose and direction—a *telos* reached through the innate use of reason, regardless of life’s complexities. *Personality Integration*

¹¹P. VALENZUELA, C. NAVARINI, J. A. MERCADO, B. FOWERS, A. PANNO, *Editorial: Emotional Regulation and Human Flourishing: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives*, «Frontiers in Psychology», 16/1565130 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1565130>.

¹²*Ibidem*.

acknowledges our dual nature, recognizing that we are not merely animals, but rational animals. We can rise above mere sentience to embrace the unique human qualities of reason and intellect. We are, therefore, poised to use both reason and experience, intellect and sentience, to flourish.

Emotional Regulation involves being aware of our feelings without dismissing them as hindrances; instead, we recognize them as part of our nature while refusing to yield to raw impulse. Finally, *Maturity and Fulfillment* happen when an objective is identified and there is a valid striving toward that goal. By applying Arnold’s framework, we use appraisal to navigate this lack of clarity and remain directed toward the Highest Good.

Here is a summary of the key points using Arnold’s ideals of human flourishing with leanings from the classical philosophy of Aristotle.

Stage of Growth	The Philosophical Root	The Psychological Process
1. Perception	Sensitive Soul: Initial contact with the world via the senses.	Initial Appraisal: A non-reflective “gut feeling” of threat or benefit
2. Filtering	Rational Soul: The intellect intervenes to judge the impulse.	Reflective Appraisal: Using the cortex to ask: “Is this impulse aligned with my goals?”
3. Integration	Virtue (Arête): Habitual excellence where reason and emotion align.	Personality Integration: Emotions are not suppressed; they are “educated” by reason
4. Fulfillment	Telos: The ultimate aim or purpose of a human life.	Self-Ideal: Moving toward the best possible version of oneself

Table 4 – Arnold’s Roadmap to Human Flourishing

4 HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIAN-CATHOLIC DIALOGUE

Hsing Yun’s Humanistic Buddhist ideal is patterned after the traditional concepts of rebirth and karma. Unlike the Christian perspective, which views life as linear and aimed toward the beatific vision of eternal union with the Divine, Buddhism adheres to a seemingly endless cycle of rebirth governed by karma. While Christianity centers on God as the arbiter of divine justice, Buddhism relies on karma—the cosmic law of cause and effect wherein every action bears a corresponding fruition.

Although Buddhism emphasizes the cycle of rebirth and Christianity focuses on an afterlife of eternal reward or punishment, both traditions ultimately give importance to the “here and now.” It is the life lived in the present moment that shapes character and defines human flourishing. In this regard, the frameworks of

Magda Arnold and Hsing Yun complement each other beautifully. For Hsing Yun, flourishing is rooted in the Three Acts of Goodness: doing good deeds, speaking good words, and thinking good thoughts. This aligns seamlessly with Arnold's concept of the self-ideal—an imperative to rise above base impulses and elevate ourselves in accordance with a shared human nature that naturally inclines toward the good. Whether the belief is a linear afterlife or a succession of rebirths, both thinkers highlight universal virtues as the core of human flourishing. Historical circumstances and theological traditions may vary, but the essence of virtue and goodness remains constant.

Compassion, loving-kindness, empathetic joy, and equanimity are timeless virtues that resonate universally, possessing a gravitas that pulls humanity together toward the common good. Whether one identifies as Buddhist or Christian, there exists a shared calling to uphold this inherent goodness. In this light, reliance upon a deity or a transcendental order becomes meaningful because these spiritual teachings manifest directly through human action. Such virtue arises not from blind obedience, but from an authentic reverence for the core dictates of true faith—a faith rooted in compassion, goodness, and the elevation of our shared humanity. This is precisely what Humanistic Buddhism aims to cultivate, just as a committed Christian is called to embody the spirit of the Good Samaritan and truly “walk the talk” of the Scriptures. Ultimately, there is no fundamental separation; there is only the harmonious integration of the essence of goodness.

5 CONCLUSION

While Magda Arnold's psychological framework emphasizes the Self-Ideal and Hsing Yun's Humanistic Buddhism centers on Buddha-nature, both converge on the idea that flourishing is found in the integration of our higher and lower natures. Arnold's “Reflective Appraisal” serves as a psychological bridge, much like Hsing Yun's “Mindfulness” allowing the individual to filter raw experiences through wisdom. For Arnold, this is achieved by aligning actions with a rational telos; for Hsing Yun, it is found in the “Three Acts of Goodness,” where the mind, speech, and body are synchronized to manifest one's inherent goodness.

The synthesis of Magda Arnold's appraisal theory and Hsing Yun's Humanistic Buddhism offers an alternative path to flourishing. We are reminded that while our biological “animality” may initially react to a chaotic environment with anxiety or unruly impulses, we possess the unique capacity for Reflective Appraisal. By filtering our experiences through reason we move toward an integrated personality that aligns with our Self-Ideal. Similarly, Hsing Yun's call to reflect our Buddha-nature through daily acts of goodness ensures that our reason is not cold

or detached but fueled by compassion. Ultimately, human flourishing is the realization that we are not victims of our environment; rather, through the deliberate use of our intellect and heart, we can transform incomprehensible challenges into a meaningful and purposive existence. This is what the good life should entail, this is the Bodhisattva idea—the telos of a self-realized individual. And whether one is a practicing Christian-Catholic or a practicing Buddhist, what matters is the practice—how we integrate the teachings into our lives in the here and now is what truly validates our belief systems.

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