

Educating for Life

Dr Yang Gyeltshen

“At this moment in time, circa 2018, it is clearer than ever that a new approach to education is key to the survival of the world in general and of Bhutan in particular. This is no exaggeration. The world’s current education system is not only outdated and even obsolete but is literally destroying the world.” Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, Bhutan Observer, 12 February 2018.

Rinpoche’s Aspiration

“If I ever have the opportunity to create a school for children, I want them to learn what it is to be human ... I want to teach children how to make a fire, and that the source of water does not come from the tap. The aim of this education is to refine ourselves so that we will see the world in a different way so that we can help others and, through helping others, make ourselves happy and content. Therefore, what we are learning is not to get jobs but to refine and make ourselves elegant both outwardly and inwardly.” Rinpoche, in his talks, often echoes this wide gap that exists between school education and genuine knowledge and wisdom.

Introduction

How to get out of this redundancy of job-oriented robot-like, skill-based education? Should it not be the other way round that, to do a job better, one should be creative, sociable, compassionate, and a critical thinker? These qualities do not spring from a standardised, competitive factory model education.

While not dismantling totally the mainstream education foundation, the learning approach needs to be holistic. This paper briefly describes how this can be done - the concept and the curricular approach that is needed, with some thematic examples.

Holistic Education - Educating the Whole Child

The “education of the whole child” is referred to as “holistic education,” and is not a new concept. This concept is rooted in writings and teachings from time immemorial . This philosophy is based on the belief that every person realises meaning and purpose in life through connections with the natural world, community interactions, and humanitarian values such as compassion and peace. Essentially, what we all want our children in schools are to:

- Be fully literate and able to benefit from and make use of the power of written and spoken language, in various forms and media;
- Understand mathematics and science at levels that will prepare them for the world of the future and strengthen their ability to think critically, carefully, and creatively;
- Be good problem solvers;
- Take responsibility for their personal as well as others’ health and well-being;
- Develop effective social relationships such as learning how to work in a group and how to understand and relate to others from different cultures and backgrounds;
- Be caring individuals with concern and respect for others;
- Understand how their society works and be prepared to take on the roles that are necessary for future progress; and
- Develop good character and make sound moral decisions.

The last six of these bullet points are generally referred to as character education, service learning, citizenship education, emotional intelligence, and the like. In Bhutan, it is known as “value education,” propagated through monastic traditions and social and cultural settings. No matter which word or phrase we use, all of these come under a single concept - “Social Emotional Learning” (SEL), intrinsically an effective endeavour. To stress the importance of compassion and ethics in classroom education, the Atlanta-based Emory University in association with the Dalai Lama Trust, have incorporated “Ethics” into “Social Emotional Learning” which then is “Social Emotional and Ethical” (SEE) learning - from SEL to SEE learning. This form of education, when added to academic learning such as described in the first two bullet points, provide educators with the possibility of capturing the balance children need.

In terms of knowledge and skill, the scientific revolution as we know it has conquered the moon and beyond; the whole world is going digital. Going digital has degenerated the socio-emotional or the ethical aspects of human life, the very cement that bonds the social fabric of any society. In his worldwide humanitarian advocacy, His Holiness Dalai Lama stresses the time to educate the heart and that learning must be holistic and transformational. This is within the modes of the Buddhist Wisdom Tools - རྗོལ་ བསམ་ སྒྲུབ་ (Hearing, Contemplating, Meditating).

Contemplative Modes of Teaching and Learning

Whatever one ventures into, be it classroom learning, household chores, or a business project, the plan must be well “meditated on”. One can only “meditate on” what one has “reflected on.” One can only “reflect on” what one has “heard” properly in the first place. This traditional mode of instruction and learning is compatible with western instructional approaches such as “Knowing, Understanding, and Doing” and the learning hierarchy of “Remembering, Understanding, Applying, Analysing, Evaluating, and Creating.”

One must “listen” attentively to “hear” properly and “know” what is being transmitted through a lecture or by reading so that the information is “transmitted” properly by teachers or from reading material to begin with. Given the digital and related information distractions, gaining the attention of students has become a teacher’s nightmare these days. That is why adequate attention must be paid to the first pathway to educating for Gross National for Happiness, which is “Meditation and Mind Training.” According to Rinpoche, there is only one problem in practicing Buddhism - “distraction” - and therefore only one solution - “meditation.”

Having “heard” properly, one must then “contemplate reflectively” to “understand” the underlying deep meanings and nuances. At this stage, attention must be paid to whether or not a proper “transaction” has taken place from “རྗོལ་པ་—knowing” to “བསམ་པ་—understanding.”

One might have heard and understood, but it would be futile if the knowledge and understanding is not put to practice — སྒྲུབ་ཀྱིས་— doing, bringing to habit. It is only by “doing,” “putting to practice what is learned, that the transformation takes place. The key terminologies here

are the “transition, transaction, and transformation” through “knowing, understanding, and doing,” compatible with the three “Wisdom Tools”—
ཐོས་ བསམ་ སྒྲུབ་ གསུམ་

Cooperation Not Competition

The idea of reward and punishment, competition, promotion of high self-esteem if not addressed properly in schools is contradictory to the ideals of caring, loving, compassionate, and decent human beings of a happy nation. Reward engenders pride, punishment engenders fear and psychological trauma, competition engenders jealousy, and high self-esteem engenders narcissism. To transcend from such practices of mundane affairs are the “Six Perfections” or the “Paramitas”—
ཕ་རོལ་ཏུ་ཕྱིན་པ་དུག་— the wings of excellence or means to cross over to the other shore, to higher ideals:

- སྤྲོན་པ་ — Generosity: to cultivate the attitude of generosity;
- རྒྱལ་ཁྲིམ་ — Moral Practice: refraining from harm;
- བཟོད་པ་ — Patience: the ability not to be perturbed by anything;
- བརྩོན་འགྲུས་ — Enthusiastic Effort: to find joy in what is virtuous, positive, or wholesome;
- བསམ་གཏན་ — Meditative concentration: not to be distracted;
- །ཤེས་རབ་ — Wisdom: the perfect discrimination of phenomena, all knowable things.

These perfections can be part of classroom practices and modern life. In the classroom, if students are “generous” in sharing their resources it will enhance each other’s work and learning. This comes with certain “moral practices” such as abstinence from rude behaviour and maintaining polite gestures. While in a group under certain working conditions, some physical, mental, or social discomforts are bound to occur. The “patience” to tolerate and endure such discomforts can be rewarding and will promote communal harmony. Not all that one hears and the activities expected to be carried out in the classrooms can be interesting so some “enthusiastic effort” must be made to make it enjoyable by reflecting on its merits. Especially when discussing complex issues, when its inherent concepts or meanings are not easily apparent, it requires “meditative concentration”, a crucial factor in any serious learning. Finally, having perfected the first five *Paramitas*, one should practice one’s “wisdom” judiciously in discriminating what is right and what is wrong.

The Organisation of Subject Matters a Thematic Approach

In a thematic approach to teaching, each subject area is brought together under the banner of a certain theme or topic such as the four elements — ས་ ལྗ མེ་ ལྷན་ (earth, water, fire, air). The topic is then studied in depth from the perspectives of reading, writing, math, science and social studies, as well as the arts for a well-balanced curriculum. The hallmark of this approach to teaching is to let students relate to real-world experiences, by building on prior knowledge of a topic. The following themes briefly illustrate the discussion.

Water: Just as children who live in high-rise metropolitan cities who have never seen a farm house or a slaughterhouse think meat comes from supermarkets, if asked where the water comes from, most of our children would instantly say it comes from a tap or a shower head. What children need to learn and be aware of is how does water gets to the taps in the first place - its journey.

At Chokyi Gyatsho Institute in Dewathang the study of the Unit on Water begins with a Field Trip. Prior to the field trip, water source related conceptual vocabularies such as falling rain, ground water, river systems, water reservoirs, treatment plants, and the like are discussed.

The whole field trip becomes an event by itself. Besides specifically assigned jobs, students study the whole water trail ecosystem - the vegetation and its habitats as well as human footprints. Some are assigned to map the water trail from the institute to the source and to find the direction of the flow and the elevation at the source and at the destination (Geography). Some work out the distance of the trail in kilometres and learn about conversion of the unit as well (Math). Some do the water quality test at the source as well as at the destination to check for any contamination (Science). Some interview the local water management personnel and learn conservation norms as simple as the importance of closing the water tap after use (Civic Duty). While discussing the importance of watershed management, the invocation of water deity, Mamaki, and other guardian spirits such as the *Naydag* and *Zhidag* cannot be ignored.

The belief is that watersheds are one of those sacred places guarded by those spirits and if encroached destructively, those spirits could strike back. Perhaps out of fear or veneration for those guardian spirits the usual practice is to light some incense and sprinkle fresh milk and say some prayers. This is, however, one of the best ways to keep the natural environment intact (Spiritual Motivation).

Fire: Fire, one of the life-giving as well as destructive forces of nature cannot be ignored. To rethink prehistory, it goes back to the hunter-gatherers, how they harnessed the use of fire. “Necessity is the Mother of Invention.” As claimed by Plato, the Friction Fire — the drill was one of the greatest wilderness survival inventions of the time. The science behind is simple - friction generates heat and heat generates fire. The irony is that in this 21st century digital age most will not be able to make friction fire, the most basic fundamental survival skill.

One of the projects in this unit on fire is to make friction fire using bow drill. What does it take for students to do this? Sure enough, the project is not as simple as it sounds. Even in groups, it takes two to three experiments at the minimum to succeed - the kind of appropriate bow to make in terms of material choice, size, and strength. Choice of socket that fits comfortably in the palm to apply downward pressure to the spindle while drilling. Spindles being one of the key pieces to the drilling set, it cannot be made from any wood. The kind of wood that works best has to be found. Same goes with the fire board. Next is the coal catcher, how best to transfer the coal to the tinder after it is produced from the drill. The right choice of tinder will ignite the coal sparks that will ignite the actual fire.

This achievement is proven by going for class picnics without the matchboxes. Students carry a bow drill which they proudly learn to use with full confidence. Should these students face similar life situations in future they will have no problems.

Gardening: As the Chinese saying goes, life begins the day we start a garden. Food, as we know, is a basic need along with clothing and shelter to survive. Knowing how to grow food was the single most decisive factor that made it possible for humankind to settle as permanent communities. In this day and age of science, technology, and mass production, not everyone is expected to grow food but we should not forget the source of human sustenance -

soil, water, plants, animals - the whole ecosystem. It is tilling the land and blending the soil, planting the seed, watering, seeing the germination of the flower and then the fruit, harvesting, sharing, and celebrating that make us human. Humans appreciate life as it is - the toil, beauty, sense of communal responsibility. In gardening, through hands-on experience, students see the interaction of the natural elements - earth, water, heat, air (རྟོན་ཅིང་འབྲེལ་བར་འབྱུང་བ་ cause and effect) all phenomena originating from causes. When a seed is sown it causes a plant to germinate.

The soil, water, light and heat, air are the conditions that promote the growth of the plant. Here, everything is connected with everything else -Dependent Origination or Dependent Arising (Buddhist concept). As an organised activity, the art of gardening gives students the opportunity to see the spiritual aspect of the environment - connecting us back to nature, social aspect of gardening - the harvest celebrations and offerings, food and nutrition - the choice of what crops to grow for healthy food and the ecosystem - civic sense of care and conservation.

As the seeds germinate, bloom, ripen, and are harvested, it not only reveals the seasonal changes, it brings to light the cycle of life and death as well. The four elements - earth, water, fire, air - each dissolves into each other, one by one, and finally into space. While living, that energy is being shared, making everything possible, from a tiny blade of grass to giants such as bulls and elephants . Each grows, lives, gets worn out, and eventually meets the inevitable – death - dissolving into space.

This cycle of birth, life, growth, death, and rebirth is what students learn to contemplate in the garden ecosystem. The natural cycle, making way, nature's recyclers, the balancing act, the food chain, all of which provide a rich venue for reflective contemplation to express what they observed and realised through writings and visual arts such as drawings, paintings, and photographs.

Conclusion

Human life is precious and sacred. Once born, every child has the same needs as others, the most basic being love and care. The most vulnerable stages of our lives are at the beginning and the end. It is not only the innate duty but also the moral responsibility of parents to take the utmost care of their children while young and so the reverse role of children to care for their parents in their old age. These mutual love, understanding, and moral responsibilities are the humane forces that bring people closer in compassionate and harmonious societies. In addition to the family and community, schools play a critical role in helping children transform to become loving, caring, compassionate, and decent human beings. To practice and foster such transformative learning, the following conditions must be created but not be limited to:

- Ideal learning conditions that promote a sense of safety, openness, and trust;
- Effective instructional methods that support a learner-centered approach;
- Exploratory learning activities that encourage alternative perspectives, problem-posing, and critical reflection; and
- It is the responsibility of educators embraced by every stake holder to make these conditions available for children in every learning centre and institution.